CHAPTER III
COLONIAL POLICY

Till recently the United Kingdom, considered the Commonwealth members and Colonies as members of the same family - the Commonwealth members as adults, and colonies as growing children who needed guidance and assistance from elders. In 1951 South China Morning Post made a pregnant observation. It wrote: "Though the British Empire has become the British Commonwealth of Nations, there remain the colonies, forming an empire within the Commonwealth. It seems, however, that, before many more years have passed, the Empire by that name will have disappeared and there will be only the Commonwealth of many partners". Thus the Commonwealth and the British empire presented a head long procession, in which independent nations at the head march and the British colonies moving towards self-government at the tail end. The progress of colonies towards attaining self-government was constant and steady and the role of the Commonwealth in this process was to help and press Britain to speed up the process. On her part, Britain encouraged greater participation of Commonwealth countries in this process, though legally it was an internal affair of Britain. Undoubtedly, it enabled the Commonwealth countries to influence her substantially in framing the colonial policy in 1950s and 1960s.

Britain's post-war colonial policy was constructive and positive in that it was sufficiently responsive to the craving of

1 "Empire Brotherhood", South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), 3 January 1951.
freedom in different parts of the Empire. The hallmark of that policy was to prepare the dependent territories for self-government and lead them towards independence within the Commonwealth. This sea-change in her centuries-old imperial policy took place with the Labour Party's sweeping into power in 1945. The Labour Party's anti-imperialist image made them popular in colonies. Though, during the period under study, basically there was little difference between the two major political parties in the policy of leading colonies towards independence within the Commonwealth and expand the organization, for the Labour Party it was an article of faith, and in fact it was the Labour policy that became the unified national policy of successive governments.

Traditionally, the Party's colonial policy was the promotion of self-government and the transfer of power to a democratic community based on adult franchise. The Empire is often now referred to as a 'Commonwealth of Nations', and the title may be accurately used in regard to that part of the Empire which consists of Great Britain and the self-governing Dominions; it cannot be applied to the non-self-governing colonies and

2 In 1955 both the Parties took an identical stand in their election pledges. There was full agreement over the expansion of the Commonwealth. They pledged that they would assist colonial territories to achieve self-government and membership of the Commonwealth. In 1951 in a press conference in London the new Conservative Government's Colonial Secretary, Oliver Littelton said: "We believe in the promotion of self-government in the Commonwealth". See Scotsman (Edinburgh), 8 November 1951. This he reiterated in his speech in the House of Commons on 14 November 1951. See The Times, 15 November 1951.

dependencies. It is the view of the Labour Party that a continued effort should be made to develop the Empire into a real Commonwealth of self-governing and socialist peoples". 4

Visualizing the transformation of the empire into a Commonwealth of self-governing nations, the Party's election manifesto of 1945 declared that it would seek to "promote mutual understanding and cordial co-operation between the Dominions of the British Commonwealth, responsible self-government for India, and the planned progress of our Colonial Dependencies". 5 On the eve of Indian independence, a party spokesman, Miss Rita Hinden, urged in 1946:

What is needed today is the development, in whatever form this may be possible, of a closer relationship between nations based on mutual help, confidence and respect. Britain has a contribution to make towards this aim by maintaining the framework not of the Empire, but of a Commonwealth of Nations, in which ties will be created as between equal partners. Even where a change over from the old imperialist relationship to Dominion status within the Commonwealth, such as Canada or New Zealand enjoys, is impossible, close co-operation between, say, Britain and India on a new voluntary basis remains most desirable. This conversion of the old idea of Empire into the new conception of a free association of peoples is the key note to the Party's attitude today. (6)

In 1955, in a discussion pamphlet, *Facing facts in the colonies*, the Party proposed new methods of consultation and association between members of the Commonwealth and the colonies.

---

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Labour Party, *Let us Face the Future* (London, 1945), p. 11. It may be noted that as early as 1933 the Party was committed to the policy of developing the British empire "into a Commonwealth of self-governing Socialist units". Labour Party, n. 3, p. 5.

while they attain self-government. One was the establishment of a grand council of the Commonwealth and Empire with a membership representing the people of the colonies and of the Dominions, with a view to developing it into a full Commonwealth Parliament. The other proposal was that the British Parliament might be converted into a Commonwealth Parliament dealing with common problems of members of the Commonwealth, with Britain's domestic affairs transferred to a separate body. But nothing came out of this proposal.

The Party not only felt proud of granting independence to colonies but also took active interest in the simultaneous growth of the Commonwealth. The Labour Government's Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, told the House of Commons on 7 November 1945: "... in the British Empire we gave freedom where it did not exist before, by the development of the Commonwealth. No one can read the policy of His Majesty's Government within the few months that have followed this war, without seeing the desperate efforts we are making to extend that liberty and Commonwealth idea still further". At the Labour Party's annual conference in 1950 he said that Britain was in the colonies "not to exploit the natives but to bring them to self-government, leading them along the road that India has gone, leading them along the road to freedom". In 1957 the Party envisaged a plan to make a new

7 The Times, 31 January 1955.
8 The Times, 8 November 1945.
9 UK, Foreign Office Document - General: Public Statements, 5 October 1950, Section 1, p. 2.
arrangement, for smaller colonies, after giving a new type of 'Dominion' status, with the nearest Commonwealth country to take over the responsibility for defence and foreign policy. 10

In 1959 the Party made the building up of the Commonwealth, by bringing new emerging nations into it, an election issue. In the manifesto it emphasized: "Today the future of Africa is poised as perilously as that of India in 1945. The only British Government which can regain the confidence of Africans is a Government whole-heartedly committed to three principles of Labour Party's colonial policy: first, that the peoples still under colonial rule have as much right as we have to be governed by consent; secondly, that 'one man, one vote' applies in all parts of the world; thirdly, that racial discrimination must be abolished". 11 However, the objective behind Lord Mountbatten's appointment as the last Viceroy of India testifies to Labour Party's keen interest in bringing new independent nations into the Commonwealth. To quote Lord Mountbatten: "One of my major reasons for accepting the extremely complicated and difficult task of transferring power in India was that I had tremendous

---

10 Manchester Guardian, 7 June 1957. But as early as 1955 it was reported that a proposal for the association of the smaller self-governing colonies with the nearest Commonwealth member and the sharing of colonial responsibilities was circulated among the Commonwealth members for their consideration. It also did not fructify. See Scotsman, 8 July 1955. In 1959, The Times also favoured the idea of placing the responsibility of small British colonies, which were incapable of standing on their own feet, on the shoulder of the nearest Commonwealth country. See "Forty Territories", The Times, 30 December 1959.

desire to retain the newly emerging countries within the Commonwealth". 12

It may be seen that there was no major difference in the attitude of the Conservative Party from that of the Labour Party. Addressing a Conservative Party meeting on 24 April 1953, the Marquess of Salisbury urged: "Let us continue, as in the past, to make it our main aim to help the less advanced peoples of the colonial Empire to climb the ladder of self-government from the lowest rung of the Crown Colony to the ultimate goal of full membership of the Commonwealth. But let us recognize that there is only a certain place at which they can safely advance. Some will reach the top soon; and some not in the foreseeable future ... For us, the Commonwealth and Empire must always be something built to last". 13 The Party's election manifesto of 1955 also underlined the Party's intention to strengthen the cohesion and influence of the Commonwealth, and "guide colonial peoples along the road to self-government within the framework of the Commonwealth and Empire. We shall do all we can to insulate these problems from the heat of Party conflict". 14 Colonies like

12 In a personal letter from Lord Mountbatten to the author dated 27 November 1970.


Gold Coast (Ghana), Malaya, Nigeria, Cyprus, Sierra Leone and Tanzania shook off the imperial yoke under the Conservative administration.

In the Government Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, spoke in the House of Commons, on 7 November 1945, of the "desperate efforts" to extend the "liberty and Commonwealth idea" within the Empire.\(^\text{15}\) Outlining his government's colonial policy, Prime Minister Attlee, said that Chapter XI of the UN Charter, containing a Declaration on Colonial Policy, was the result of the initiative taken by the United Kingdom.\(^\text{16}\) He felt that the doctrine of Trusteeship, as a guiding principle in the colonial policy, was not new to the United Kingdom; and said that it had been the guiding principle of his country's colonial policy for many years. He observed that the implications of Chapter XI of the UN Charter were that:

The Colonial Powers who have signed this Charter recognize the principle that the interest of the inhabitants of non-self-governing territories are paramount and accept, as a sacred trust, the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well being of the inhabitants of these territories. They undertake to ensure, with due respect for the culture of the peoples concerned, their political, economic, social and educational advancement, their just treatment, and their protection against abuses. They undertake also to develop self-government, that is, to take due account of the political aspiration of the


peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions, according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and their various stages of advancement. (17)

Therefore, the policy pursued by his Government was to develop colonies to enable them to improve their economic and social conditions, and, in course of time, to create conditions for responsible self-government. It considered that the colonies were a great trust, and, therefore, their progress to self-government should be accelerated as far as possible. 18 While this was the basic attitude adopted by the Government, it was cautious not to allow itself to go to any extreme. Prime Minister Attlee, for example, once turned down a suggestion that colonial representatives should be allowed to attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings. 19 However, the Labour Government between 1945 and 1951 increased the pace of colonial development by way of bringing out new constitutions to various colonies like Ceylon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Malaya, Singapore, Gold Coast, Uganda, Trinidad and Mauritius. This was speedily done particularly between August and December 1945. This liberal attitude initiated the British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent, and the process thus initiated by the Attlee Government was irreversible that the Conservative governments

17 Ibid., col. 668.


which came later could not but follow the Labour policy and accelerated the process of giving independence to colonies, and expand the Commonwealth.

While, broadly, the policy of the British Government was to hasten the pace of granting independence to her colonies, the Commonwealth too played a significant role in moulding that policy during the post-war period. The new Commonwealth countries were particularly keen to accelerate the process. In the Commonwealth they found an instrument of pressure on Britain to achieve this objective. Adhering to the well established convention in Commonwealth relationship, Britain kept her Commonwealth colleagues informed of her various moves on decolonization. This was strictly followed when she granted independence to India and Pakistan also. \(^{20}\) The Commonwealth involvement in British colonial policy was mentioned by P.C. Gordon Walker, the Commonwealth Secretary, who, in June 1951, told the British House of Commons that while Britain alone was responsible for the internal constitutional developments in the colonies, she recognized the interest of other members of the Commonwealth in the matter and was prepared to keep them informed of major developments in the sphere. But on the question of full membership of the Commonwealth, all members of the organization would be consulted. \(^{21}\) Technically also, this

---

\(^{20}\) Testifying to this healthy precedent, Louis St. Laurent, the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs, said on 24 February 1947 that the British Government kept the members of the Commonwealth informed of her policy in India in 1947. See Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 1947, vol. I, p. 714.

\(^{21}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1951.
should have been like that because, while granting of independence to a colony was a British decision, membership of the Commonwealth was a collective Commonwealth decision.22

The essential principle of British colonial policy was "to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth".23 But, significantly, this policy of encouraging the colonies to develop into self-governing and independent states "within the Commonwealth" was questioned by the South African Prime Minister Dr Malan, in 1951, when he stressed the right of all Commonwealth countries to be consulted before new admissions. This procedure was followed while India, Pakistan and Ceylon were given membership of the organization. But while this was the known practice Dr Malan reasserted the right of the other Commonwealth countries, probably with the intention of using it later to block black African countries' entry into the Commonwealth, on equal status.

22 "We must make quite clear the distinction between the grant of responsible self-government within the Commonwealth, which is a matter for the United Kingdom Government and the territory concerned, and for them alone, and the question of becoming a full member of the Commonwealth, which is of course a matter for all members of the Commonwealth. All steps towards responsible self-government within the Commonwealth are a matter between us and the territory concerned, and we must make that distinction quite clear and abide by it". See the speech of Patrick Gordon Walker, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, on 7 June 1951. UK, House of Commons, Parliamentary Debates, vol. 488, Session 1950-51, col. 1199.

Sensing the future multi-racial character of the Commonwealth and realising Britain's active support to it, Dr Malan said in 1951 that Britain and the United Nations were, between them, killing the Commonwealth. He clarified his position later that he was against the early granting of independence to colonies of Africa because of the "very low level of civilization" and also that the entry of Gold Coast (later Ghana), the first black African country to become independent, would change the whole character of the Commonwealth, compared to what it originally was. In 1954, the Union Government expressed unhappiness over Ghana's possible membership in the Commonwealth. She warned Britain against committing herself to Gold Coast's joining the Commonwealth, without arriving at complete agreement with other members. But Dr Nkrumah was prepared to accept interim self-government short of full independence, only on condition that Britain should support the equal status of Gold Coast in the Commonwealth when she would become independent. The new Asian members and Canada were in favour of the Gold Coast being given the assurance sought by Dr Nkrumah.

It was assumed that the British promise for independence "within" the Commonwealth made the membership of the Commonwealth more or less automatic, and the consultation formal. But the

24 The Times, 27 February 1951.
25 Daily Telegraph, 6 April 1951.
26 The Observer (London), 4 April 1954.
South African pressure on Britain was formidable that Britain was unable to give categoric assurance, unilaterally, when Nkrumah asked to reassure his country's status within the Commonwealth after achieving independence. If the issue was forced to extreme by South Africa then, the split in the Commonwealth between the White and non-White would have been effected. While Britain agreed that the Commonwealth membership technically required the consent of all other existing members, in practice, it was clear that the South African veto would be a hypothetical one. The reaction of the Whitehall was not at all encouraging for the Union to pursue the matter further. The main consideration governed the British attitude was not to do anything which would eventually retard the growth of the Commonwealth organization.

Britain always maintained that she alone was responsible for the colonial policy. But she did not deny to other Commonwealth countries the chance to express their views and share her thinking on colonial problems. The Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meetings provided them with good opportunities. At every one of the Meetings, Britain tried to take the Commonwealth countries into confidence on developments in the colonies. For example, at the 1957 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting Colonial Secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, reported the agreement to give complete independence to Malaya on 31 August 1957. Also, he reviewed the constitutional progress in various British colonial territories in South East Asia and also explained that the Crown Colony of Singapore should have full internal
self-government in 1958. At the Plenary Session on 4 July 1957, the Prime Ministers discussed the future of the British colonies. Similarly, the Prime Ministers unanimously agreed that Malaya should become a full member of the Commonwealth when she became independent on 31 August 1957.

It would appear that Britain was keen to see colonies remaining in the Commonwealth when they became independent. This was a positive stand aimed at nurturing the growth of the Commonwealth into a multi-racial organization. The idea of granting independence to colonies within the Commonwealth had the support of political parties also. In 1949 the Conservative Party, in a policy statement, affirmed that "self-government within the British Empire and Commonwealth is an aim to be achieved as soon as Colonial peoples are ready for it". The Labour Party also reaffirmed its policy in granting independence to colonies that "Our aim is a multi-racial Commonwealth in which Britain and the former dependent territories work together as equal partners for the benefit of all". The Party's newspaper *Daily Herald*, editorially wrote in 1954 that: "Britain's aim in the Colonies should be to win the friendship of the population, develop their resources and raise living standards, and help them forward to self-government within the Commonwealth as quickly as possible".

27 *The Times*, 5 July 1957.

28 *The Hindu* (Madras), 6 July 1957.


30 *The Times*, 23 August 1954.

For Britain, the elevation of a colony to the status of a Dominion, was just an act of transfer of position from Empire to the Commonwealth. Her intention behind giving independence to colonies 'within the Commonwealth' was explained by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a speech to the Young Conservative National Rally, in London, on 18 April 1959:

Our purpose in the colonies is to bring them along the road to a Commonwealth of free, independent, prosperous, and politically sound nations, bound together by respect and loyalty. And that is what we are doing. Since the war 500,000,000 people in Asia and Africa have been to free nationhood by this country. Other people might copy this example.

In the first 50 years of this century many of the great nations and empires have been broken up - the German, Austro-Hungarian, the Turkish. Others have made immense growth - of which the Russian is the most notable. Our own has changed from the old imperial power to the new Commonwealth partnership. (32)

Ghana's independence presented a typical case study of this British object and the process she evolved for the purpose. Just before Ghana's (then Gold Coast) independence, Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for Colonies, said in Parliament that it had always been the wish of the British Government "that the Gold Coast should achieve its independence within the Commonwealth". (33) He expressed the Government's readiness to accept a motion, calling for independence 'within

32 Harold Macmillan's speech at the Young Conservative National Rally at the Festival Hall in London, on 18 April 1959. Text of speech was supplied by Press Department, Conservative Central Office. Conservative and Unionist Central Office, Press Release, No. 6743, dated 18 April 1959.

the Commonwealth passed by a reasonable majority of the Gold Coast Legislative Assembly. 34 Accordingly, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, then Chief Minister of Gold Coast, sought the approval of the Legislative Assembly to request the British Government to bring in legislation "for the independence of the Gold Coast as a Sovereign and Independent State within the Commonwealth under the name of Ghana". 35 The Ghana Independence Bill, introduced as a result in the British Parliament, was mainly for the purpose of conferring on Ghana "the basic powers necessary to give it the status of an independent country within the Commonwealth". 36 While speaking on the Bill, on 11 December 1956, John Hope, Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations said:

There is, of course, a clear distinction between the grant of responsible self-government within the Commonwealth and full membership of the Commonwealth. The first is a matter for the United Kingdom and the country concerned, and for them alone, and the second is a matter for all the members of the Commonwealth. We are looking forward to Ghana becoming a full member of the Commonwealth and at the request of the present Gold Coast Government we intend to approach the other members on the subject in the very near future. We have every hope that Ghana will become a full member on the same day as she becomes independent, namely, 6th March. (37)

34 Ibid.


37 Ibid., cols. 239-40.
While welcoming Ghana to the Commonwealth family of nations at
the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in 1957, the
Commonwealth Prime Ministers felt that Ghana's independence
demonstrated the "practical evidence of the progress made by
the United Kingdom Government in the pursuit of their policy
of fostering constitutional development in their dependent
territories". 38

The views of the members of the Commonwealth had a definite
impact on Britain's colonial policy. To effect such an impact
was one of the aims of the new members. In the opinion of
V.K. Krishna Menon, one of the main objects of India's continued
association with the Commonwealth was to help colonies to
achieve independence and continue in the association. To
quote him:

The reason that India decided to stay as a full member
even after becoming a Republic was the hope that, with
the liquidation of the Empire, there could still be
something useful and valuable in the long association
between the British and the Indian peoples which could
be preserved. Nehru also thought that by India becoming
the first non-White equal member in this body, she would
be making it possible for a large number of African and
Asian countries later to attain their independence and
continue a useful association. (39)

In obvious recognition of India's key role in this sphere, during
the first Independence Day celebrations of Ghana, on 6 March 1957,

38 See Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting held in London,
26 June - 5 July 1957, Final Communiqué. Nicholas Mansergh,
Documents and Speeches on Commonwealth Affairs 1952-1962

39 V.K. Krishna Menon in a speech at the India League Republic
Day Meeting, in London, on 26 January 1971. India Weekly
flags of India, Ghana and Britain were hoisted in a ceremony organized by the Peoples Progressive Party in Georgetown. In a meeting there, it was acknowledged that Prime Minister Nehru had played a significant role in Ghana's achievement of Independence.  

Time and again, at the United Nations and outside a majority of members, specially all new members of the Commonwealth, expressed their vehement opposition to colonialism. The anti-colonialist campaign spearheaded by India, culminated in the passing of a resolution, at the 15th session of the UN General Assembly, which declared that immediate steps be taken in Trust and Non-self-Governing Territories which had not yet attained independence to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories. The campaign lead by India and some other members of the Commonwealth was so formidable that a leading British daily commented: "The Afro-Asian group has become numerically the largest in the Assembly and its collective voice habitually uplifted in condemnation of the policy of the so-called colonial powers ... looks like being the loudest for some time to come".  

40 *The Hindu*, 8 March 1957.  
42 *The Times*, 17 September 1957.
Opinions expressed by the members of the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meetings and outside were weighty factors in moulding the British colonial policy. The views of the Commonwealth countries assumed greater significance, because Britain disallowed others to talk about its colonial policy for the reason that it was a domestic affair of the United Kingdom, and hence beyond the scope of the United Nations. In December 1953 Oliver Lyttelton, the British Colonial Secretary, told the House of Commons that Britain would refuse to allow the political affairs of the British colonial territories to be discussed by the United Nations. But at the Commonwealth Conferences, where Britain represented colonies also, she did not advance such arguments to prevent discussion of her colonial policy. Besides the British Parliament,

45 Some unofficial circles in Britain did not like her representing the colonies in the Commonwealth. In 1954 Philip Fothergill, Chairman of the Liberal Party Executive, advocated direct participation of colonies in the Commonwealth Conferences. See Manchester Guardian, 6 February 1954. The unofficial Commonwealth Relations Conference, held in January 1959, in Palmerston North (New Zealand), expressed the view that "time has come when distinction between colonies and independent members of the Commonwealth might be diminished.... It was proposed that all colonial territories should be admitted immediately to some form of associate membership in the Commonwealth, and that colonies of the Commonwealth should be consulted by the United Kingdom before the United Kingdom Government took decision to admit associate members to full membership". Dawn (Karachi), 25 January 1959.
Commonwealth Conferences were the only forum where she needed to give a review of the progress made in helping colonies towards self-government. Therefore, according to an informed writer, it provided "the principal forum for all the tactics of the 'anti-colonialist' movement".46

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings provided opportunities for Britain and other members to exchange views on the subject and perhaps to influence each other. It was customary that the British Commonwealth Secretary or the Foreign Secretary, or the Colonial Secretary, reviewed the colonial situation at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings - particularly the progress of British dependencies towards independence. The approach was explained, in 1960s, by a British Prime Minister who assured that "it remained to be the objective of his government to lead [colonies] to independence, on the basis of democratic government and the principle of universal adult suffrage, such of the remaining territories as desired it and could sustain it, and that the British Commonwealth would continue to seek to devise the most appropriate alternative arrangements for such smaller territories as were unable, or unwilling, to proceed to full independence".47 This kind of informal approach helped Britain to take other members of the Commonwealth into confidence while re-orienting her colonial policy. The result was that, in fundamentals and objectives,


there was hardly any difference of opinion among Commonwealth members. This healthy rapport between Britain and fellow Commonwealth nations made the organization more influential in Britain's colonial policy than any forum except the British Parliament itself. This meeting of minds was so wholesome a feature that unofficial circles in other Commonwealth countries expressed the view that the responsibilities for the British colonies should be entrusted to the Commonwealth so as to develop mutual interest in the functions of the British Colonial empire. In the British Parliament it was suggested that Governors for Colonies should be drawn from all parts of the Commonwealth.\footnote{48 See the speech of M. Pollick, Labour Party Member, on 27 November 1952. UK, House of Commons, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, vol. 508, Session 1952-53, col. 954.}

But the point of influence was not only in evolving basic principles of her policy, but on the pace of development of self-governing institutions in colonies with the object of granting them independence at the earliest opportunity. To quote Philip Noel-Baker, the Commonwealth Secretary in the Attlee Cabinet, : "The opinion of the new members of the Commonwealth helped powerfully to form a change of view which brought decolonization. The statesmen of the Commonwealth did a great deal to prepare British politicians for what President De Gaulle, as soon as he came in 1958, called 'the necessary decolonization of the world'.\footnote{49 Philip J. Noel-Baker, n. 43.} But while, in France, this was a new attitude inspired by a powerful single man, in Britain
this thought was the creation partly of the British people
themselves and partly of the Commonwealth statesmen. 50

As Professor Northedge rightly points out, the Commonwealth
influence was quite substantial in the rapid giving of independence,
particularly to African countries from 1957. It is true that
the emergence of independent states in Africa was largely due to
the result of local nationalism in Africa, but in guiding them
towards the path of independence, the role of the Commonwealth
assumed significance. According to Northedge the British
decolonization was peaceful "partly because the successive
Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conferences since the end of the
war have had the effect of co-ordinating a natural British
desire to decolonize, together with the pressure of the new
countries, particularly of India, in favour of decolonization.
And making together of these two impulses, I think, has
accelerated the decolonization of the British Empire". 51 There
was Commonwealth appreciation of British efforts and difficulties
and "certainly the Commonwealth has acted in a most effective
way in supplementing, or reinforcing, the natural British wish
to see these countries independent, when they were able to stand
on their own feet". 52

However, since Commonwealth governments had trust in the
bonafides of Britain's post-war colonial policy, during the
period under study, they seldom accused Britain openly for her

50 Ibid.

51 F.S. Northedge, Professor of International Relations, London
School of Economics, in an interview with the author on
8 December 1970, in London.

52 Ibid.
lapses, if any, in this connexion. So that, on certain occasions, even India, a champion of colonial people's cause was accused of compromising her anti-colonial stance in respect of British colonies. Even a competent scholar like Norman D. Palmer, wrote almost in a huff, "India's membership in the Commonwealth is obviously a real curb on her anti-colonial feelings". But the record shows that India was beyond reproach in all respects. In fact, she was earnest in her efforts in championing peacefully the cause of freedom in all colonies. She was emphatic that colonies should achieve independence through peaceful means, which, according to Jawaharlal Nehru, would leave no trace of bitterness in the wake of independence. In this connection, it may be mentioned that in conformity with his appeal for a peaceful approach, Jawaharlal Nehru refused to participate in the discussion on Cyprus at the 1956 Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting, because the whole movement was surcharged with violence and terrorism. As Professor Rajan writes, the Indian approach to the question was "a pragmatic, not doctrinal, approach, an approach that would bring about the desired results, and not merely provide an occasion for giving vent to feelings and aspirations of the Indian peoples". No doubt, as a member of


55 The Hindu, 7 December 1955.

56 The Hindu, 15 July 1956.

the Commonwealth, India was keeping her finger on the pulse of Britain's colonial policy and made the Commonwealth an effective instrument in erasing the vestiges of colonialism. Britain's withdrawal from Ghana was so graceful that Ghana's Prime Minister Nkrumah declared on the day of independence:

"We part from the former Imperial Power, Great Britain, with the warmest feelings of friendship and goodwill.... Instead of that feeling of bitterness which is often born of a colonial struggle, we enter on our independence in association with Great Britain and with good relations unimpaired". 58

In formulating her colonial policy, Britain attached considerable value to the views and feelings of the members of the Commonwealth from Asia and Africa. In a speech at the United Nations, on 28 November 1960, the British representative, David Ormsby Gore, openly acknowledged this fact. "On the subject of colonialism, my government will listen with the greatest attention to the voices of Africa and Asia". 59 "... If we have sometimes had differences of opinion on this question, these have been differences of method and sometimes of training; they are not differences of intention... Indeed, in the sense that colonialism involved the permanent subjection of one people to another, it was already accepted as an out-of-date political relationship by all those who, like the United Kingdom, subscribed without reservation to Chapter XI of the United Nations Charter and have since honoured it in practice". 60 Britain believed in

58 *The Hindu*, 7 March 1957.
59 *GAOR*, Session 15, plen. mtgs, 28 November 1960, p. 983.
60 Ibid., pp. 983-84.
the early independence of the colonies wherever practicable. 61

Records show that in practice Britain was true to her precepts.

The very fact that Britain felt obliged to report to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings the progress the colonies made towards attaining self-government showed the awareness of Britain about her responsibility — self-imposed or otherwise — to the Commonwealth in preparing the colonies for independence. This responsibility she discharged with a paternal outlook. No doubt that this enlightened approach won the confidence of the other members of the Commonwealth and that it put other colonial Powers like Portugal, Belgium and France on the defensive. As a leading British newspaper commented, in outlook and objective, as a result of the close association in the Commonwealth, Britain and other new members of the Commonwealth remained identical in their anti-colonial posture. 62

The post-war record of Britain's liberal colonial policy was a proof of how Britain and other members of the Commonwealth narrowed down their differences to the minimum. This impression made two outstanding Indian statesmen, S. Radhakrishnan, and V.K. Krishna Menon, to pay tributes to Britain's colonial policy. 63

61 Ibid., p. 986.

62 The Observer, editorial, 24 January 1954.

63 The Hindu (Dak edition), 11 July 1956, p. 4, col. 5. Dr S. Radhakrishnan, then Vice-President, said that the British had been more humane in their dealings with the peoples of dependent territories than some other Powers. Similarly in July 1960, Indian Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon, in a public meeting held in Bombay said that it must be said to the credit of the British Government that its enlightened role had helped African territories under its control to acquire an increasing measure of self-governance. See The Hindu, 26 June 1960.
Dr Hastings Banda, Nyasaland nationalist leader said in London in 1960: "Among all the colonial powers in Africa today, the British were the only people who could send a man to prison today and invite him to Buckingham Palace tomorrow". Similarly, the Ceylon Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike also paid a tribute to British colonial policy. During the ceremony of transfer of the Katunayake air base by Britain to Ceylon, he said: "When the history of this period comes to be recorded, one of the outstanding factors in it will be the dignity, cordiality, friendship and good grace with which Britain handed back control of its dependent territories to the people who ruled them earlier".

However, for Britain's policy-makers, the Commonwealth provided an elastic international framework within which colonies could be prepared for self-governing status. The framework was made sufficiently elastic and flexible with the admission of India to the Commonwealth, as a dominion first, and later as a republic. Thus, granting dominion status to self-governing colonies and giving them membership of the Commonwealth were to be integrated acts in the process of Britain's decolonization; and the natural framework for planning the process was the Commonwealth organization. This was an important reason why during the post-war period the transfer of power took place smoothly, without a violent break with the former imperial Power. While pursuing a positive policy of granting independence to colonies, the British efforts were

---

64 *The Times*, 3 May 1960.

65 *Daily Telegraph*, 2 November 1957.
centered round the basic objective of securing and preserving the goodwill and co-operation of the colonial people in assisting them with the development of these colonies. After decolonization, Britain did not psychologically feel the loss of colonies because, most of them, on achieving independence, opted for remaining within the Commonwealth, to which, during the period under study, she attached great sentimental value. As regards Britain, this cushioned the shock of the loss of empire. As for the new nations which came out of the British empire, they continued their close association with the former imperial Power through the Commonwealth. Therefore, undoubtedly, the simultaneous liquidation of colonies and the expansion of the Commonwealth was the lodestar of Britain's colonial policy. As Iain Macleod, the Colonial Secretary, said in 1961, the rapid political advance of colonies towards self-government was "the logical result of our consistently held policy of leading the dependent territories to full self-government, or independence, within the Commonwealth". The true spirit behind this policy was explained by Michael Stewart, Foreign Secretary of the Wilson Government. He said that Britain, as a benevolent imperial power, had cordial relationship with her colonies. But this situation could not last, in the wake of nationalism in the colonies. The question posed then was: "Can you preserve that when the imperial relation disappears?"

---

The hopeful answer was 'yes'. That was why, I think, that there was so much hope that when the countries became independent, they would want to preserve links with Britain, particularly because, this meant keeping alive in the world a multi-racial organization.... A major concern was to see that this connection could be maintained; not only they had been maintained by countries akin to us racially, like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but also to see whether this concept could be broadened multi-racial".67