

**CHAPTER VIII**

## CONCLUSIONS

It seems reasonable to conclude that British foreign policy during the period under review (1945-1961) was dominated by the desire of preserving the friendship and goodwill of other Commonwealth countries, and thereby maintain her Great Power status and influence. The respectable position she enjoyed in other Commonwealth capitals had in turn exposed her foreign policy to substantial influence of these countries. Therefore, in the attitude to good many questions in world politics, one aspect Britain invariably examined with care was the possible reaction of other Commonwealth countries on her particular stand, thus making it a standing factor in Britain's foreign policy considerations.

The Commonwealth received the great consideration in Britain between 1945 and 1951 under the Labour Government. This British attitude was determined by the outlook of Prime Minister Attlee himself, who had the vision to foresee the potentiality and value of the new multi-racial Commonwealth for Britain in future. He believed that Britain's destiny lay in association with the Commonwealth. In subsequent years, other Prime Ministers - Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan - also looked at it as an important British interest and held great expectations from it for Britain, other

Commonwealth countries and even the World Community in general.<sup>1</sup>

In the immediate post-war years, Britain's declining military position hardly reduced her concern for the security of other Commonwealth countries. In order to ensure her own security and also the security of other Commonwealth countries, she envisaged regional defence arrangements in Europe and Asia. A major British objective of military alliances like NATO, SEATO and ANZAM, was that all the Commonwealth countries, excepting the non-aligned, should become members. These alliances, a sequel to the Cold War, were primarily anti-communist in design and character. Britain was watchful of the Russian and Chinese intentions in Europe and Asia, because she saw a potential danger from them to Commonwealth countries. Britain supported the American policy of 'containment' of communism in order to ensure the safety of democracies, a category in which all Commonwealth countries then belonged to, against the Communist threat. The NATO, born out of the fear of Soviet military strength to threaten European security, ensured Britain's own security. But the Communist threat was more real to the Commonwealth countries of Asia and Far East. The Korean crisis and the Chinese invasion of Tibet underlined

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1 In 1951 Churchill spoke of Britain "gathering all her Commonwealth around her" to revive her influence in world affairs. Royal Institute of International Affairs, Documents on International Affairs, 1951 (London, 1954), p. 137. In 1952 he said that the world should not "underrate the abiding power of the British Commonwealth and Empire". Royal Institute of International Affairs, Documents on International Affairs, 1952 (London, 1955), p. 47.

the necessity of satisfactory security arrangements for the region. Concerned over the new situation in the region, Prime Minister Churchill had taken up the problem with the United States when he visited Washington in 1952. Though he expressed concern over the potential danger to the region, Britain was not in favour of a formal military alliance with the countries of the region to stem the tide of the Chinese Communist threat, without active participation of important Commonwealth countries like India in it. Therefore, when John Foster Dulles, the American Secretary of State, failed to invite India and Burma for a meeting in Washington in April 1954, to set up a working group to study the SEATO proposal, Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, took strong exception to it and stopped the British ambassador from attending that meeting on the ground that the American omission would be "insulting" to both India and Burma.<sup>2</sup> Britain feared that the American approach would effect a cleavage in the Commonwealth and alienate the sympathy of important countries of the region like India, which were opposed in principle to military alliances. Britain agreed to be a member of the SEATO only after satisfying herself that it would not damage Commonwealth relationships. The British efforts to assuage the feelings of resentment of countries like India on SEATO emanated largely from strong Commonwealth considerations. It may be noted that Richard Casey, the Australian External Affairs Minister

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2 Anthony Eden, Full Circle (London, 1960), pp. 97-98.

held reservations on Australia's role in the SEATO. While seeking Parliamentary approval to Australian membership of the SEATO he remarked: "I wish to state categorically that the Australian Government would never regard itself as being committed contractually or morally to military action against any other member of the Commonwealth".<sup>3</sup> Obviously, Australia adopted this attitude mainly to ward off India's fears on Pakistan's motive in joining the SEATO. Though there was no similar overt commitment from the British official circles, one can reasonably assume that the British outlook to the Treaty was not different from that of Australia. However, these formal security arrangements did not mean that Britain would be less concerned with the security of India (a non-member) than with that of Pakistan (a member), if their security were threatened by external attacks. The net-work of strategic bases she maintained in and around some of the Commonwealth countries gave additional strength to Britain to go to the help of other Commonwealth countries. Perhaps, therefore, during the period, an outside Power could have hardly contemplated attacking a Commonwealth country without expecting Britain's instantaneous support to the defence of the latter. The help Britain extended through ANZAM to independent Malaya against terrorists, was certainly a defensive action which Britain would not have undertaken, had Malaya not been a Commonwealth member.

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3 The Hindu, 28 October 1954.

Maintenance of trade with other Commonwealth countries was the hallmark of Britain's post-war economic policy. She was careful not to do anything which affected her trade with other Commonwealth countries. But, as an exception to this, it may be noted that had not the United States pressurised Britain at a critical moment in her history, Britain would not have agreed, under the Havana Charter, that she would not grant new preferences in trade. This was one of the major reasons why trade between Britain and other Commonwealth countries did not grow substantially during the post-war period. The establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957 created a new situation which called for a revision of her economic policy. She thought that if she kept herself aloof in the face of an integrated Western Europe, she would be shut out of a growing economic and political region of the world. It kindled a desire in Britain for closer association with the community, if possible, without hampering her trade connexions with other Commonwealth countries. In an attempt to realize this objective, she tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the European Economic Community for a European Free Trade Area, in which she made it clear that adequate protection to Commonwealth interests would be a pre-requisite of her dealings with the Economic Community. Later, in 1959, when she became a founder member of the European Free Trade Association, she gave adequate protection to her special trade relationship with other Commonwealth countries, by way of

retaining the freedom to fix tariffs on imports from other countries outside the Association. But the Free Trade Association was quite inadequate to achieve the economic objectives Britain visualized, since it was not strong enough to compete successfully with the EEC. This was one of the reasons why eventually Britain sought EEC membership in 1961.

With the granting of independence to the Indian sub-continent, Britain had substantially lost her imperial instinct. In the twilight of the Empire, Britain found in the Commonwealth a convenient means of continuing the erstwhile close association with the new nations of Asia and Africa, most of which were her former colonies. She realized that if she responded to the call of colonial nationalism in time, through the continued association with them through common membership of the Commonwealth, she would be able to preserve her influence on, and the goodwill of, the newly-independent nations. This realization was supplemented by the friendly influence of the new Commonwealth countries on Britain which expedited the process of decolonization. The discussions of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers on the progress Britain made in leading her colonies towards independence had a tremendous impact on Britain's colonial policy, although this influence was not so crucial since Britain herself accepted in principle the winding up of the Empire. Therefore, Britain's natural desire of giving freedom to her colonies happily synchronized with the friendly influence of other Commonwealth countries.

Hence, she had the satisfaction that she was acting in conformity with the opinion of other Commonwealth countries. Therefore, the smoother and quicker transfer of power, the most remarkable aspect of British decolonization during 1950s and afterwards, owes in no small degree to Britain's deference to Commonwealth opinion.

An important aspect of Britain's foreign policy in which there was a substantial Commonwealth influence was in her approach to problems relating to racial discrimination. Britain looked to the Commonwealth very warmly as an institution which could make a significant contribution to dissipate the acidity of racial tensions in the world. But this hope began to wither away during the latter half of the 1950s when colour problems began to make inroads into the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings, making them hot-beds of racial conflicts. Though the Union of South Africa, a Commonwealth country, practised racial discrimination, Britain did not for many years come out openly against it, because of her strict adherence to the principle that she would not criticize another fellow member of the Commonwealth in public. Therefore, despite her basic distaste for apartheid, she refrained herself from expressing an opinion on the policy, under the cover of the 'Domestic Jurisdiction' Clause (Art. 2.7) of the UN Charter. She was able to continue this policy for some time because Commonwealth criticism against racial discrimination of the Union was at a low key. But the campaign against the Union's racial policy was intensified

in 1960, and forced Britain to take a definite stand on the issue. Prime Minister Macmillan's Capetown speech in 1960, warning the Union Government on apartheid, broke the ice and marked the "wind of change". This courageous step Macmillan took after realizing that unless Britain came out openly against apartheid, it would adversely affect the future of the Commonwealth. But despite this criticism, he did not want to penalize the Union by way of ostracizing her from the Commonwealth association. But the attitude of most other Commonwealth members that the Union could no longer freely remain within the association unless she abandoned apartheid policy, forced him to make in 1961 the crucial choice between the racist Union and the multi-racial Commonwealth. Naturally, the choice went in favour of the latter. Had the other members of the Commonwealth not confronted Britain with a choice between them and the Union, perhaps Britain would not have agreed to part company with the Union for pursuing the apartheid policy. In bringing out this change in the British attitude, the Commonwealth opinion was the most decisive factor.

In geographical terms, Britain could be called a European country. But considering her global connexions, including her ties with the Commonwealth, it would not be quite right to call her so. Politically as well as economically, it was impossible for Britain to confine her role in world affairs to Europe and European interests. Therefore, when the European Union movement was launched immediately after the war, the Commonwealth

consideration was one of the most important factors that inhibited her from becoming a leader of the movement. She adopted the stand that Continental European countries should unite themselves without her participation. This was largely (not wholly) because of the fear that Britain's greater involvement in European affairs would eventually affect adversely the relationships between Britain and other members of the Commonwealth and would tend to diminish the warmth of feeling towards each other.

Thus while the Commonwealth factor received priority in the multiple facets of British foreign policy in the 1940s and 1950s, certain developments, inside and outside the Commonwealth had disenchanting effects on Whitehall towards the Commonwealth. Britain's endorsement of the doctrine of 'containment' and the help she sought from the United States for her security (and the security of other Commonwealth countries) through regional defence arrangements reflected the decline of British power position. Therefore, a few Commonwealth countries, notably the Pacific Dominions, looked directly to the United States for their security. The ANZUS Treaty between the United States and the Pacific Dominions without Britain, was an important development in British foreign policy. Britain's exclusion from the ANZUS hurt the British pride and disappointed that the Dominions chose to conclude the Treaty without Britain as a party to it. Similarly, the failure of some Commonwealth countries to follow Britain to recognize the Peking regime in China also

raised many eyebrows in Whitehall.<sup>4</sup>

The Suez crisis in 1956 and the attitude adopted by a majority of Commonwealth countries towards the British stand marked a turning-point in Britain's foreign policy in general and in her attitude to the Commonwealth in particular. There is no doubt that besides the American pressure, the fear of breaking up the Commonwealth was a powerful factor that forced Britain to stop fighting in Suez and to withdraw gracefully as soon as the United Nations Emergency Force occupied the Canal area. The critical attitude of the majority of Commonwealth members to the course of action Britain adopted and its impact on the British people were powerful factors in forcing Prime Minister Eden to climb down from the Government's initial stand, (as well as, personally, from office).

Britain's interest in the Commonwealth began to fade after the Suez debacle. At the beginning, she had hoped that she would get the automatic support of the Commonwealth. But this was not forthcoming. On the contrary, a majority of Commonwealth countries stood up against her. Britain felt aggrieved that the fellow members of the Commonwealth ignored the merit of the British point of view, and criticized her unduly, that too to support a non-Commonwealth country. It doubly hurt Britain, not only because she was criticized, but because of the feeling

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4 According to Professor Miller, the other Dominions did not do so because they had no vital national interests in China to protect as Britain had. Britain did so because there was an urgency to protect her trade, investment and nationals in China. See J.D.B. Miller, Britain and the Old Dominions (London, 1966), p. 181. It may be noted that India led Britain (and other Commonwealth countries) in recognizing the Peking regime on 6 January 1950.

that they were unfair in denigrating her vehemently, while that vehemence was not there when they criticized Soviet intervention in Hungary which took place about the same time. There she saw a double standard in the outlook of some important Commonwealth countries in looking at these two contemporary international problems. She felt that she had been kicked around by these countries with the help of the Soviet Union and the United States. This generated a hurt feeling in Britain that at a crucial moment in the history of her foreign relations, she was badly treated by the world as a whole, including, especially, by a majority of Commonwealth members. This was a major reason why Britain developed cold feet towards the Commonwealth thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

The failure of the majority of the Commonwealth countries to support Britain was a severe blow to Britain's great power status. It exposed the weakness of Britain in that she, together with France was unable to act in defiance of the United States. Their combined strength was not enough. With that, Britain's dream of building up the Commonwealth as a self-sufficient group of nations, helping each other, also gradually began to vanish. Therefore, the traditional assumption that the Commonwealth was an asset for Britain came

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<sup>5</sup> According to John Hare, a former Minister in Macmillan's Cabinet, said that the British disenchantment to the Commonwealth grew mainly because "we get so many kicks" from other Commonwealth members. John Hare (now Lord Blakenham), in an interview with the author on 6 October 1970, in London.

to be widely disputed, especially in the ruling Conservative Party circles. There developed in Britain a new West European - oriented outlook in international relationship. Britain noted the change in the outlook of other Commonwealth countries towards her, underlining the need of a change in her attitude towards them also. The establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957 provided an opportunity for Britain to look to Europe for fresh support. The European debate in the late 1950s was an index to the growing influence of continentalism in Britain, posing questions like independence within the Commonwealth or interdependence within the European Union.

Besides these political factors, there were powerful economic factors that gradually promoted the British disenchantment towards the Commonwealth. The most important among them was the change that took place in the traditional pattern of Britain's foreign trade with other Commonwealth countries. In a bid to reduce dependence on imported manufactures, some Commonwealth countries developed their own manufacturing industries and produced indigenously many items they formerly imported from Britain. In order to give protection to these new and infant industries, these Commonwealth countries put import restrictions also. In the light of this development, Britain decided that her future trade pattern would concentrate mainly on more sophisticated items for which, she thought, the rest of the Commonwealth would not provide an adequate market. She thought that access to the markets of

highly developed West European countries would provide the answer to her future trade pattern. She hoped that if she could join "the Six" on honourable terms, without jeopardizing her special economic connections with the Commonwealth, she would be able to widen the home market from 50 million people to that of 200 million. This basic economic objective was also uppermost in the mind of Prime Minister Macmillan in 1961 when he tried to sidle Britain into the EEC. Apart from this, a number of other Commonwealth countries established fresh trade links with non-Commonwealth countries also. The United States firmly established its economic foothold in Canada. Britain's decisions to give greater support to her farmers limited the market for some Commonwealth produce. It was a hint to those Commonwealth countries like Australia and New Zealand, who exported food products to Britain, to look elsewhere for new customers for their products. Inevitably, these developments also gradually affected adversely Britain's trade relations with the Commonwealth. Though this did not result in a diminishing trend in the total value of British exports to other Commonwealth countries (which still continued to show an upward trend) it indicated a new trend in British-Commonwealth trade.<sup>6</sup>

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6 The position of British exports on the eve of her application for EEC membership in 1961 was that, 16.7 per cent of her exports went to Common Market countries, 13.1 per cent to European Free Trade Association and 43 per cent to countries of the Commonwealth preference system. In terms of total value between 1953 and 1960, British exports to Commonwealth countries registered an upward trend. During the period, in Australia it had gone up by 23 per cent, in India 32 per cent and in Pakistan 22 per cent. See Hugh Gaitskell's speech to the Labour Party annual conference on 3 October 1962. Labour Party, Britain and the Common Market (London, 1962), pp. 5 and 7.

The shift in British policy towards other Commonwealth countries slowly began to unfold itself in 1961 when Britain brought legislation to restrict Commonwealth immigration into Britain and when Britain formally sent an application for membership of the European Economic Community. The liberal policy adopted by Britain for decades in respect of admission of Commonwealth immigrants into Britain was essentially due to the belief that, being the 'mother' country, Commonwealth citizens had a right to go and live in Britain. This belief was a major factor delaying legislation restricting or regulating admission of Commonwealth immigrants upto 1961. Hence, the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill of 1961 marked the beginning of the break up of the traditional concept of Britain's relationship with other Commonwealth countries. Similarly, the British application for membership of the EEC indicated the impending shift in British policy towards Europe and the Commonwealth. It indicated that by the beginning of 1960s, the extra-European world, particularly the Commonwealth, would be less important than it was in 1940s and 1950s as a theatre of operation of British foreign policy, and that there would be increasing focus on Western Europe. Calculations of exclusive national advantage even vis-a-vis the Commonwealth gradually began to influence the minds of Britain's foreign policy makers. Thus in 1961, one finds Britain on the threshold of an inward-looking phase in respect of her external relations.

The abandonment of the Blue Streak ballistic missile programme in 1960 (on the ground that it was too costly to maintain) cost Britain the front rank position among Great Powers. In the circumstances Britain hoped to regain her status and enhance her influence in world politics through an increase in her wealth. It was to acquire more wealth and strength, Britain turned to Western Europe. Therefore, she approached the EEC through a formal application in 1961, to negotiate mutually acceptable terms for membership. While doing so, however, the British negotiating position took a great account of Commonwealth interests. At the opening of the 1961 EEC negotiations, at Brussels, by way of advancing Commonwealth interests, Britain hoped that she could strike a bargain for better terms. Prime Minister Macmillan wanted that the terms should permit Britain to continue the pattern of intra-Commonwealth trade. Opening the negotiation for membership on 10 October 1961, Edward Heath, Britain's chief negotiator, made it clear to the EEC: "I am sure you will understand that Britain could not join the EEC under conditions in which this trade connection was cut, with grave loss and even ruin for some of the Commonwealth countries".<sup>7</sup> This showed that even in 1961, Britain did not desire that the Commonwealth should become a declining factor in her foreign

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<sup>7</sup> The Times, 28 November 1961.

policy. The overall Commonwealth interests still received a weighty consideration in Whitehall. Harold Macmillan's frank statement in August 1961 symbolized this British outlook towards the Commonwealth. He said: "If I thought that our entry into Europe would injure our relations with, and influence in, the Commonwealth, or be against the true interest of the Commonwealth, I would not ask the House to support this step".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Macmillan's speech on 2 August 1961. See UK, House of Commons, Parliamentary Debates, vol. 645, Session 1960-61, col. 1494.