

**Not foreign to each other:
Commonwealth Prime
Ministers' Conferences
1944-1969**



Robert O'Shea
Pembroke College

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Figure 1: In the garden at No. 10 Downing Street during the 1944 Conference

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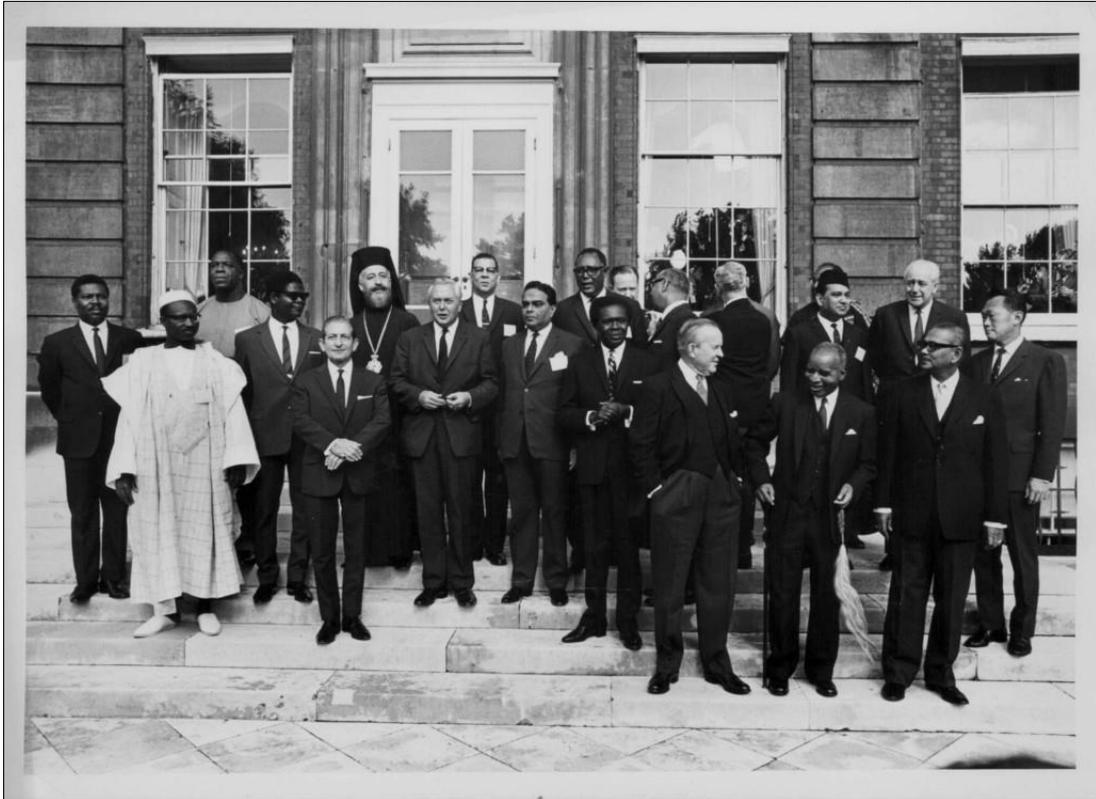


Figure 2: In the garden at Marlborough House during the September 1966 Conference

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Short Abstract

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences were a unique experiment. They were an attempt at an intermediate mode of multilateral relations: members were no longer bound in an imperial hierarchy, nor were they fully foreign. A conscious effort was made to position the Commonwealth as a family, and the Conferences as their periodic reunion. Avoiding a 'diplomatic' culture at the Conferences in favour of a familial veneer allowed participants to claim that binding resolutions were not necessary and that meaningful cooperation could occur by consensus. This appeared to offer potential for forging a 'third way' between superpower blocs in a Cold War environment.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the existing Commonwealth literature as the Conferences were the core structure of the Commonwealth until the formation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, yet have never been the subject of a full-length study. The thesis also engages with the concept of the 'British world', arguing that the Conferences had a major role in projecting British 'soft power' once martial or economic hegemony proved impracticable. By drawing on archival sources in eight Commonwealth countries, this thesis shows that the Conferences were effective in facilitating discussions on flashpoint topics such as white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia, even if the Commonwealth failed to fulfil hopes that it would remain an important international grouping. The study also has contemporary relevance, given that the Conferences continue as Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, and that questions of transnational identity and 'foreignness' continue to shape debates over Britain's relationship with Europe and its 'world role'.

Long Abstract

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences were a unique experiment. They were an attempt at an intermediate mode of multilateral relations; members were no longer bound in an imperial hierarchy, nor were they fully foreign. A conscious effort was made to position the Commonwealth as a family, and the Conferences as their periodic reunion. This construct was mutually advantageous for Britain and its former imperial possessions. Avoiding a 'diplomatic' culture at the Conferences in favour of a familial veneer allowed participants to claim that binding resolutions were not necessary and that meaningful cooperation could occur by consensus. There was no constitution and no ballots. Such a format demonstrated that former colonies were not tied to a supra-state, while Britain benefitted from having the Conferences as a symbol of the peaceful transfer of power and a means of preserving continuing British interests. Decolonisation may have been a series of ad hoc decisions rather than a preordained path, but the Prime Ministers' Conferences lent the appearance of continuity to the process, born as they were out of the Colonial and Imperial Conferences which had occurred since 1887. The Prime Ministers' Conferences were both an adaption of the Imperial Conferences and a rejection of them. Informality was emphasised: instead of formal morning-coated sessions in St James's Palace, prime ministers wore everyday lounge suits for working meetings at No. 10 Downing Street. However, much of the social schedule of the Imperial Conferences was retained; the Conferences continued to occur against a backdrop of generous hospitality from the monarchy down. Such social aspects may seem unimportant, but this thesis will show how the milieu shaped political outcomes.

Similarly, while the Commonwealth is now a relatively unimportant international actor, this was not inevitable. Amongst the multitude of groupings and pacts erected in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Commonwealth had the advantage of being ready-made; the

Prime Ministers' Conference provided a high-profile platform for new countries, sometimes just weeks after independence. Other organisations such as Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation for African Unity had to develop their scope and procedures whereas the Commonwealth simply tweaked some of its imperial precedents; principles such as non-interference in the domestic affairs of other members were retained where mutually convenient. For instance, intra-Commonwealth migration never became a formal agenda item as new Commonwealth countries proved as protective of their immigration policies as the old members. However, when an issue became pressing, a technicality could be found to push it onto the agenda; South Africa's move to become a republic provided the excuse to raise apartheid in plenary meetings. The Commonwealth was rare in having such structural flexibility; its lack of institutional form allowed it refashion itself to ensure its own survival, as demonstrated by the fact the successor to the Prime Ministers' Conferences, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, continue to this day.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the existing Commonwealth literature as the Conferences were the core structure of the Commonwealth until the formation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, yet have never been the subject of a full-length study. The thesis also engages with the concept of the 'British world'. While the term is usually used to refer to Britain and the 'white' dominions, the Conferences were a deliberate attempt to take the pre-existing network between Britain and the dominions and expand it. While this was largely an elite level project – even junior government ministers were discouraged from attending in the stead of prime ministers – the Conferences nonetheless had a broader role in projecting British 'soft power'. As continued martial or economic hegemony proved impracticable for Britain, the Commonwealth appeared to offer a vehicle for the preservation, even propagation, of British cultural norms and modes of governance. The Conferences had some success in achieving these aims. The first chapter explores how British

influence over the Conferences was shaped by the continued attraction of London as a global city, and a sort of de facto Commonwealth capital. The second and third chapters provide a chronological account of the Conferences from 1944 to 1969, seeking to explicate how they ‘worked’ from the point of view of the various participants. The inflection point between the two chapters is the 1962 Conference, at which Britain presented its plans to join the European Economic Community. Before this point, the Conferences had operated on ‘club’ lines, avoiding the debate of detailed economic issues in favour of expansive, even speculative, discussion of international affairs. The club model had also been predicated on Britain being a sort of disinterested chairman; tying the disparate countries of the Commonwealth together without being a regional rival to any of them. This model was threatened by Britain attempting to join a regional bloc in the form of the common market, and the episode heightened the focus on national self-interest at subsequent Conferences. The fourth chapter considers the role of personalities at the Conferences. As the Conferences had no constitutional form, they were susceptible to being moulded by individual characters, and the authority many first generation leaders possessed gave the Conferences an profile and prestige beyond that which its lack of institutional role would imply. The fifth chapter assesses the publicity the Conferences received. The Conferences had an important role in shaping the attitudes of the British public to the end of Empire by presenting the Commonwealth as its egalitarian successor. The sixth chapter examines the communiqués of each Conference, highlighting how the custom of publishing a consensual summary often left the Commonwealth in the difficult position of either issuing meaningless motherhood statements or explicating internal dissent.

By drawing on archival sources in eight countries, this thesis seeks to assess the ‘official mind’, not just in Whitehall but across Commonwealth capitals. While the scrutiny of briefings and talking points indicates that there was genuine enthusiasm for the

Commonwealth concept, it failed to fulfil the hopes invested in it at the end of the Second World War. The Commonwealth had important assets in a transcontinental base and a common language, but it proved impossible to forge a middle path between foreign diplomacy and domestic intimacy. Nonetheless, the study of the Conferences helps place the crises of the period, such as white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia, in the broader context of post-independence relationships between Britain and its former colonies. Finally, the tensions over Britain's economic and political relationship with Europe which permeated the Conferences of the 1960s have contemporary parallels as Britain again reassesses its 'world role': questions of 'foreignness' remain at the heart of debates over sovereignty and identity.

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My record-keeping skills do not extend to quantifying the number of librarians and archivists who assisted me, but I am grateful for the unfailing support of staff at all repositories, especially the Rhodes House Library. The majority of the thesis was written in the library of the Oxford University Catholic Chaplaincy, whose inhabitants were (and are) a fount of fellowship and kindness. Pembroke College was generous as an institution in supporting me with travel grants and was vital as home to the Middle Common Room, which shall always be fond in my memory.

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Notes on Style

Throughout the thesis, Britain is used instead of United Kingdom except in quotations.

Old Commonwealth is used to refer to Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and, until 1961, South Africa.

New Commonwealth is used to refer to all other members who remained in the Commonwealth after achieving independence since 1947.

Table of Abbreviations

ANZAM	Australia-New Zealand and Malaya (security arrangements)
ANZUS	Australia-New Zealand-United States Security Treaty
AUKMIN	Australia-United Kingdom Ministerial Meeting
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CH	Companion of Honour
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
DO	Dominions Office
EEC	European Economic Community
FO	Foreign Office
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
HMG	His/Her Majesty's Government
HMS	His/Her Majesty's Ship
ITV	Independent Television
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NIBMAR	No Independence Before Majority African Rule
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
RAC	Royal Automobile Club
SEATO	South-East Asia Treaty Organisation
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence (in Rhodesia)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

It is not too much to say that the future of the world was in the balance at London ... It is, perhaps, too much to say that the new world was born at London, but it did not miscarry and its chances of lusty birth later on were vastly improved.¹

This hyperbolic statement, in a 1944 pamphlet by influential Canadian journalist Grant Dexter, is illustrative of the significance attributed to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences as the Second World War drew towards a close. The discussions held in London in May 1944 were seen as decisive in shaping the form of the United Nations, and the Commonwealth itself was thought of as a pivotal international grouping which could serve as a 'third force', mediating between the United States and the Soviet Union. This was not an impossible ideal. Britain had clung onto its colonial Empire, which, with refocused post-War management, could be extremely lucrative: a 1949 Conservative Party policy paper asserted that a 'handful of British planters and mining engineers in Malaya' could 'earn more dollars than the whole of industry in the United Kingdom'.² Moreover, Britain retained strong ties with the dominions, which had been reaffirmed by wartime: the 1944 Conference communiqué spoke of 'the sure presage of our future victory'.³ These twin resources of dependencies and dominions seemed an obvious way of preserving Britain's great power status. Historians in recent decades have shown that British decolonisation was not an inevitable, linear process; John Darwin even suggested the post-War era could be periodised as the Fourth British Empire.⁴ This may be too grand a title, but it is a useful reminder that, as Darwin has also observed, 'until the end of the 1950s the

¹ Grant Dexter, *The Commonwealth Conference* (Winnipeg, 1944), p. 3.

² Conservative and Unionist Central Office, *Imperial Policy: A Statement of Conservative Policy for the British Empire & Commonwealth* (London, 1949), p. 12.

³ Commonwealth Secretariat, *The Commonwealth at the Summit: Communiqués of Commonwealth Heads of Government 1944-1986* (London, 1987), p. 13.

⁴ John Darwin, 'Was there a Fourth British Empire?' in Martin Lynn (ed.), *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 16.

limits on superpower dominance still seemed to leave much scope for British power'.⁵ This was especially true if the third power was offering a third way: rebranding the Empire as the Commonwealth and granting national independence in exchange for continued membership in a voluntary grouping which would nonetheless buttress the sterling area and give Britain a continued 'world role'.⁶ This was not solely a British project. Commonwealth membership enhanced the reach of the dominions in international affairs. They shared the 'Commonwealth seat' on the United Nations (UN) Security Council amongst themselves and claimed their own spheres of influence in the North Atlantic, the Pacific and Southern Africa. Moreover, the Commonwealth experiment proved palatable to newly independent states. With remarkably few exceptions, new nations chose to stay in the Commonwealth.⁷ Part of the appeal was the Commonwealth's peak gathering: the Prime Ministers' Conferences, held in London every one to two years. Lasting between seven and thirty-two days, the Conferences promised in-depth debate with a free-form agenda, conducted in private yet providing a public platform. Colonial rule conditioned nationalist leaders to see London as the natural centre for discussions, a sentiment reinforced by the constitutional conferences held in London before each transfer of power. Moreover, just as the Commonwealth offered Britain the prospect of Empire on the cheap, the Commonwealth offered new leaders a cost-free forum to advocate for accelerated decolonisation. Therefore, while the Commonwealth may now be an unimportant body, it is fruitful to examine its aspirations and shortcomings in the context of the time, when it appeared that it could defy the global divisions into ideological and regional blocs that occurred in the Cold War.

⁵ John Darwin, 'British decolonization since 1945: A pattern or a puzzle?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12:2 (1984), p. 206.

⁶ Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee, "'Staying in the game": Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role', in Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds), *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 152.

⁷ Burma and Aden were the only former colonies which did not join upon independence; other exceptions include Sudan, an Anglo-Egyptian condominium, and the mandate of Palestine, which became Israel.

In particular, this thesis will argue that the Commonwealth was a unique attempt to be ‘non-diplomatic’. The Commonwealth had no dedicated bureaucracy, no constitution, no standing orders and no permanent representatives. Moreover, it needed no interpreters, due to the commonality of English. Instead, through the Prime Ministers’ Conferences its leaders conversed directly with each other – in private and in a single language. The Conferences were portrayed as the antithesis of the rule-bound, adversarial UN. There was no voting and no ‘permanent members’ with a structural veto. Prime ministers did not need to consult their cabinets. The Conferences had great potential to be powerful, and sometimes made definitive judgements, such as ‘the deliberate and friendly snapping of the crown-link’ to allow India to remain a member as a republic.⁸ More often, however, action was forestalled by the need for unanimity; an implicit veto which manifested itself in anodyne communiqués and public displays of frustration as the Commonwealth failed to take meaningful action on pressing issues such as Rhodesia’s unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). Nonetheless, the Conferences were the centrepiece of efforts to distinguish Commonwealth relations from global norms. Commonwealth countries exchanged high commissioners rather than ambassadors; while in diplomatic practice ambassadors are considered envoys of heads of state, high commissioners instead are deemed representatives of heads of governments.⁹ The distinction initially existed as Commonwealth members had the same person as head of state, but the title was preserved after republics became a feature of the Commonwealth, not least because it meant that prime ministers were not outranked in the order of precedence by their nation’s envoys when they came to London. Similarly, Britain maintained separate Foreign and Commonwealth Relations

⁸ Patrick Gordon-Walker to Clement Attlee, 31 December 1948, in W. David McIntyre, *The Britannic Vision: Historians and the Making of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1907-48* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 48.

⁹ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a Difference: The Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner, 1880-2006* (Leiden, 2007), p. 127.

Offices, and many other Commonwealth countries styled their 'foreign' affairs ministries as 'external' affairs to avoid 'othering' Commonwealth members. Furthermore, applications by Commonwealth countries to join the International Court of Justice excluded intra-Commonwealth disputes from its jurisdiction.¹⁰ All these actions served to preserve the agency of the Prime Ministers' Conferences and the notion, as described by Jawaharlal Nehru, that Commonwealth countries were 'not completely foreign to each other'.¹¹

The Conferences were the summit of the whiggish public portrayal of British decolonisation as a peaceful transfer of power to moderate nationalists. Newsreels enthused about the presence of Asian and African delegates in national dress. Leaders formerly imprisoned under British rule were made Honorary Freemen of the City of London and were fêted with degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. The Conferences ensured that the prime ministers were familiar faces to audiences in Britain and across the Commonwealth. The subsidised Commonwealth press rate for telegrams meant that most newspapers carried dispatches from London as if they were local news, while leaders used their presence in London to broadcast to their home audiences via the 'Empire of the air': the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service. The thesis contends that London continued to serve as the de facto capital of the Commonwealth. London was the primary source of government aid for the new Commonwealth and of private capital for old and new alike. Socialising filled the spaces between plenary sessions with innumerable garden parties, sherry receptions and white-tie banquets. The thesis argues that the Conferences were a successful deployment of British cultural capital; in exchange for generous hospitality towards visiting delegations, Britain retained substantial control of the timing, agenda and

¹⁰ Thirteenth meeting, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, 5 June 1964, The National Archives (TNA) CAB 148/4.

¹¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, speech in Indian Constituent Assembly, 16 May 1949, in S.C. Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth* (Agra, 1970), p. 118.

format of the Conferences. Therefore the atmosphere remained unmistakably British: discussions resembled Cabinet meetings and were styled Prime Ministers' Conferences even though some leaders were executive presidents of one-party states.

While Britain's unchallenged position as host gave it strategic advantages, it perpetuated the impression that Britain considered itself 'first among equals'.¹² This was the paradox of the Commonwealth project: Britain sought to relieve itself of the expense of Empire and gain international plaudits for decolonising in a largely orderly fashion, yet it also sought to retain control of the post-independence Commonwealth agenda. As host, Britain planned to relegate discussion of Rhodesia to the end of the 1964 Conference; in response Afro-Asian-Caribbean delegates formed a caucus which met separately before plenary sessions, undermining the Commonwealth's claim to avoid formal blocs. Furthermore, as the extent of mutual agreement declined, public scrutiny of the meetings only increased, with the Conferences providing a backdrop for candlelight vigils and violent demonstrations protesting South African apartheid and Rhodesian UDI. The press were no longer placated by dry communiqués and would publish verbatim speeches, leaked to them before they were even delivered. Nevertheless, communiqués continued to be drafted and the close inspection prime ministers gave to the final wording ensured that divisive issues were raised twice: first during general discussion and again at the final session which approved the communiqué. The weight of precedent imposed by the long lineage of the Conferences made any variation difficult; if leaders had decided to abandon issuing communiqués it would be seized upon as a portent of dissolution for the Commonwealth, but their continued publication only highlighted the degree of dissent. In addition to disputes over communiqués, the Conferences were preoccupied with definitional

¹² Lester Pearson, *Smuts Memorial Lecture: Commonwealth 1970* (Cambridge: 1971), p. 10.

debates over membership, be it mechanisms for keeping India in as a republic, or considering creating a mezzanine status for small countries whereby they could be Commonwealth members but without the right to attend Conferences. This obsession over the rules of the 'club' indicate the difficulty in using an essentially practical event such as the Conferences as the foremost symbol of Commonwealth cooperation. Other means of promoting Commonwealth identity, such as a Commonwealth appellate court or parliamentary assembly were discussed, but always dismissed as an intrusion on national sovereignty.¹³

Ultimately, the attempt to retain a familial tone to the practice of Commonwealth relations proved impossible in the face of rapid expansion and divergent economic policy, particularly Britain's desire to join the European Economic Community (EEC). However, the Conferences should not be seen as simply a salve to British pride upon the end of Empire. The Conferences did ensure communication between increasingly disparate countries continued at the highest level. For instance Ghana and Tanzania did not abandon Commonwealth membership when they broke off diplomatic relations with Britain in 1965 over UDI.¹⁴ Similarly, only in London could India's Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistan's Liaquat Ali Khan talk discreetly, or could South African External Affairs Minister Eric Louw take Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah out for lunch.¹⁵ Even if the primary achievement of the Conferences was preventing the collapse of the Commonwealth, they provide a rich historical example of an endeavour to plot a middle path in international affairs. Given their recent emancipation from imperial rule, Commonwealth countries were unwilling to sacrifice sovereignty to enable closer Commonwealth cooperation, yet neither did they wish to conduct relations on a purely bilateral

¹³ Ninth meeting, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 10 February 1965, TNA CAB 148/18.

¹⁴ Derek Ingram, *The Commonwealth at Work* (Oxford, 1969), p. 29.

¹⁵ Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics* (New York, 2010), p. 184; British High Commission, South Africa to Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), 8 March 1960, TNA CO 1032/362.

basis. In 1949 Nehru said he aimed to ‘create a status which is something between being completely foreign and being of one nationality’.¹⁶ This thesis will explore this project, arguing that the Conferences were at its centre.

The story of the Conferences is intrinsically linked with the narrative of post-War decolonisation. However in the works of many scholars the Conferences serve primarily as a backdrop for moments of crisis: the withdrawal of South Africa at the 1961 Conference, and demands to use force in Rhodesia at the two Conferences held in 1966. For those who J.D.B. Miller described as ‘idealistic-progressive’ Commonwealth commentators, such as Derek Ingram, these milestone Conferences signified a Commonwealth which gained a clear purpose by becoming a multi-racial grouping.¹⁷ For pessimists such as Duncan Hall, South African withdrawal and the predominance of the Rhodesian question in the second half of the 1960s instead denoted the disintegration of the non-interference principle in the affairs of other members.¹⁸ However, neither camp gives sufficient attention as to why and how the Conferences occurred. Given their origins in the Colonial and Imperial Conferences stretching from 1887 until 1937, it is remarkable how much of the imperial edifice (plenary sessions and communiqués) and social scaffolding (banquets and royal audiences) was retained, and persisted into the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) held since 1971. Even if the continuity between the Imperial and Prime Ministers’ Conferences can be partly attributed to inertia – the fact that ‘in British institutional life no one ever pulls the plug’ – this cannot explain why the Prime Ministers’ Conferences continued to have such strong attendance from

¹⁶ Nehru, speech in Indian Constituent Assembly, 16 May 1949, in Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth*, p. 117.

¹⁷ J.D.B. Miller, *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Expansion and Attrition 1953-1969* (London, 1974), p. 495.

¹⁸ H. Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (New York, 1971), p. x.

national leaders.¹⁹ For instance, Nehru never missed a meeting. It is only by examining the Conferences as a whole that their appeal becomes evident: as a forum they cut across differences in geography and wealth, and, with no treaty obligations or published minutes, leaders could speak candidly without binding themselves.

This thesis is the first full-length work on the Prime Ministers' Conferences. Whereas monographs have been published on the Imperial Conferences and CHOGMs, material on the period 1944-69 is diffused across a vast range of sources.²⁰ The existing literature is rich because the post-War era comes under the purview both of major academic projects on late imperial history, such as the relevant volumes of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* and the *British Documents on the End of Empire* series, in addition to works focussed exclusively on the Commonwealth, for instance, volumes of the *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs* by Nicholas Mansergh and J.D.B. Miller.²¹ However, a number of problems arise in using such works to assess the impact of the Conferences. The 'end of Empire' volumes are useful in demonstrating the centrality of the Conferences to Commonwealth identity, and how in addition to discussing policy they also had symbolic import in the absence of constitutional ties. A 1951 British inter-departmental minute in A.F. Madden's *Dependencies since 1948* observed that:

Although there is no formal or binding provision for meetings of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, they have come to be looked upon as an essential feature of Commonwealth membership, perhaps even more important than allegiance to the Crown, in view of

¹⁹ David Adamson, *The Last Empire: Britain and the Commonwealth* (London, 1989), p. 1.

²⁰ John Edward Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 1887-1911: A Study in Imperial Organization* (London, 1967); Maurice Ollivier, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences from 1887 to 1937* (Ottawa, 1954); Stephen Chan, *Twelve Years of Commonwealth Diplomatic History: Commonwealth Summit Meetings, 1979-1991* (Lewiston, 1992).

²¹ Judith Brown and William Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume 4: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999); Robin Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume 5: Historiography* (Oxford, 1999); Ronald Hyam (ed.), *The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945-1951* (London, 1992); Ronald Hyam and William Roger Louis (eds), *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1957-1964* (London, 2000); Nicholas Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Co-operation and Post-War Change, 1939-1952* (London, 1958); Miller, *Problems of Expansion and Attrition*.

India's having become a Republic. It is difficult to imagine the Commonwealth as we know it continuing in being without these periodic meetings.²²

By their nature, however, works on decolonisation can only treat post-independence relations as an epilogue to their primary role of examining the intentions and actions leading to grants of independence.²³ Conversely, much of the historiography of the post-imperial Commonwealth takes the formation of the Secretariat in 1965 as its starting point.²⁴ Even when earlier Conferences are acknowledged, such as in the primary source collection *The Commonwealth at the Summit: Communiqués of Commonwealth Heads of Government 1944-1986*, no historical analysis is provided. Rather, the title subsumes the earlier Conferences into the terminology of CHOGM and is accompanied by a self-congratulatory preface from the Commonwealth Secretary-General.²⁵ Therefore a gap in the literature emerges, with only the occasional book bridging the span between the late 1940s, where the Conferences consisted of as few as five leaders, and 1969, when the meetings grew to thirty leaders. Many of those which do span the period, such as Joe Garner's *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* are examples of 'insider' history, Garner for instance worked for the Commonwealth Office and its predecessors for thirty-eight years.²⁶ Even some academics such as Nicholas Mansergh could be considered 'insiders', given the close relationship between the Commonwealth's chroniclers and practitioners. In 1948 Mansergh was consulted by Canadian officials regarding Indian membership as a republic; Norman Robertson, Canadian High Commissioner in London, was informed that Mansergh 'thinks it worthwhile if it kept India in the Commonwealth even for the matter of a few years. If India eventually left

²² CRO/CO Working Party: Constitutional Development of Colonial Territories, 28 February 1951, DO 35/2217, in A.F. Madden (ed.), *The End of Empire: Dependencies since 1948* (London, 2000), pp. 14-5.

²³ A.N. Porter and A.J. Stockwell (eds), *British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-64: Volume 2 1951-64* (Basingstoke, 1989).

²⁴ W. David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth 1965-90* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 5.

²⁵ Shridath Ramphal, 'A Working Internationalism', in *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 1.

²⁶ Malcolm MacDonald, 'Foreword', in Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), p. xi.

the Commonwealth, it should not be too difficult to return to its original concept of a hard core of like-minded countries'.²⁷

The prevalence of insider histories is heightened by the plethora of biographies on Commonwealth prime ministers. The Conferences, with their emphasis on personal rapport between leaders, feature frequently.²⁸ Biographies provide a rich seam of anecdotes, but very few used the Commonwealth as a major prism for their character study; a rare exception being Trevor Clark's tome on Nigerian Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa.²⁹ As a result of being an episodic backdrop in most biographies, the Conferences were often uncritically wrapped in familial phrasing rather than being an object of analysis. For instance, the first chapter of Canadian External Affairs Under-Secretary H. Basil Robinson's biography of John Diefenbaker was titled 'Meeting the family: Commonwealth PMs'.³⁰ Familial metaphors were a useful shorthand for the historical background countries shared, but they obscured the fact that such history was a product of colonialism. A more accurate rendering comes from Paul Taylor, who argued that the Commonwealth was founded on two 'forgivable' hypocrisies: a 'hypocrisy of structure and a hypocrisy of ideology'; despite professions of equality, activity still centred on Britain and the British administrative tradition provided the 'identitive focus'.³¹ As Ali Mazrui put it bluntly in 1967:

The most important tie between Commonwealth countries is one which has not to be mentioned. It is implicit but unproclaimed. For its own survival as a tie it must remain unobtrusive and unacknowledged. Yet, in the ultimate analysis, what could a New

²⁷ Ford to Norman Robertson, 5 October 1948, 'King 1948: Robertson - Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations', Library and Archives Canada (LAC), MG26-J1, volume 442, microfilm reel C-11051.

²⁸ Alistair Horne, *Macmillan: 1957-1986* (London, 1989); Colin Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

²⁹ Trevor Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman: Abubakar from the Black Rock* (London, 1991).

³⁰ H. Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto, 1989), p. 10.

³¹ Paul Taylor, 'The Commonwealth in the 1980s', in A.J.R. Groom and Paul Taylor (eds), *The Commonwealth in the 1980s: Challenges and Opportunities* (London, 1984), p. 307.

Zealander have in common with a Jamaican or a Zambian, if not the bonds of a shared Britishness?³²

This thesis takes a similar line, arguing that the appeals to clubbiness and family ties were euphemisms for the continued Britishness of the Conferences, which was accepted by all delegations as part of an implicit compact. The Conferences enabled British governments to periodically present the Commonwealth to the electorate as the capstone of peaceful decolonisation – as Darwin put it, ‘to embalm the whole in a paste of consistency with a dash of altruism’.³³ For leaders of newly decolonised states, attendance at the Conferences had the dual benefit of acting as a marker of independence from Britain yet also a vehicle for making continued demands of it. A 1964 Canadian brief argued that: ‘Attendance at a Prime Ministers’ Meeting by the heads of government of newly independent Commonwealth countries was in itself valued as a symbol of independence perhaps second only to their first appearance at the United Nations’.³⁴

The cachet inaugural prime ministers attached to making their London debut is a reminder of the British cultural imperium nationalist leaders emerged from. Even the most obscure of sporting or political metaphors were familiar to delegates: John Strachey argued that ‘to know a no-ball from a googly and point of order from a supplementary question is genuinely to have something in common’.³⁵ Ironically, as Minister for Food in the Attlee government, Strachey was responsible for the infamous Tanganyika groundnut scheme, which epitomised the interventionist post-war policy to make the colonial Empire into a greater dollar earner for the sterling area, a strategy which arguably hastened the end of Empire. As Darwin put it: ‘nothing

³² Ali Mazrui, *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Friction and Cultural Fusion* (Oxford, 1969), p. 41.

³³ Darwin, ‘British decolonization since 1945’, p. 188.

³⁴ ‘African views of the Commonwealth’, 15 April 1964, ‘Canada and the Commonwealth - Visits - Visits to Canada of Commonwealth Ministers – Trinidad’, LAC MG26-N3, volume 269, file 818.1/T832.

³⁵ Denis Judd and Peter Slinn, *The Evolution of the Modern Commonwealth, 1902-80* (London, 1982), 108.

stimulated political mobilization in the British colonies more than London's efforts to encourage economic development'.³⁶ Strachey's invocation of test cricket and parliamentary protocol as bases for unity typify the attempts made, once continued political and economic hegemony proved impracticable, to replace British 'hard power' with 'soft power'. This thesis engages with Joseph Nye's conception of soft power – persuasion by co-option and cultural attraction rather than by force – by pointing to Britain's deliberate use of hospitality and 'custom' to influence procedure and policy.³⁷ Most notably, the monarchy was employed to simultaneously lend gravitas and domesticity to Conference proceedings. The day before the 1949 Conference, the prime ministers lunched at Buckingham Palace to celebrate Princess Elizabeth's twenty-third birthday; Lester Pearson, Canadian External Affairs minister, recorded that it 'was a nice combination of gold plate royal formality and friendly family atmosphere', and, more importantly, 'I think that the eastern prime ministers were suitably impressed by the palace atmosphere'.³⁸ The definitive work in this area is Philip Murphy's *Monarchy and the End of Empire*; its deft interweaving of archival sources also informed the approach of this thesis, which seeks to draw together the administrative records of the Conferences with the interpersonal experiences contained in official correspondence and biography.

This thesis looks to unpack the glib familial language, with its connotation that the Commonwealth was a natural family unit, rather than a deliberate construct designed to impress upon both participants and the public the continued relevance of the 'British World' by expanding its sphere to prime ministers in newly independent, non-white states. The Prime Ministers' Conferences sought to graft them onto a pre-existing interchange between Britain

³⁶ Darwin, 'British decolonization since 1945', p. 206.

³⁷ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, 2004), p. 24.

³⁸ Pearson, notes on visit to London, April 19-30 1949, in Janice Cavell (ed.), *Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada: A History in Documents 1909-2009* (Ottawa, 2009), p. 143.

and its white dominions; the Imperial Conferences, historically a locus of attention for those seeking imperial federation, or at least some form of ‘Greater Britain’, were re-badged as Prime Ministers’ Conferences.³⁹ The language of family was deployed, no longer to denote racial kinship, but instead to instil a larger, looser ‘British World’ view amongst leaders in the sense of remaining broadly founded in British – and by extension western – economic and political models.⁴⁰ This intention was explicitly raised in a 1950 Foreign Office (FO) memo: ‘One of the principal reasons for such a conference would be to endeavour to wean the Asian members of the Commonwealth further away from their neutral outlook’.⁴¹ The importance of keeping newly independent states in the fold was heightened by what a 1956 Indian briefing described as the ‘Pactomania’ of the post-War period, wherein alliances hardened into economic and military blocs. The Commonwealth ostensibly stood aloof from such divisions by eschewing a treaty relationship between its members, but it was nonetheless implied that a communist member would be beyond the pale; M.S. Rajan’s *Post-War Transformation of the Commonwealth* cites Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies’ observation that ‘the day a member of the Commonwealth goes communist, a divisive element could be said to have been introduced’.⁴² Conversely, South Africa argued that it should be allowed to continue in the Commonwealth in spite of apartheid because it was a bulwark against communism in Africa.⁴³ Thus while the Commonwealth was not a binding bloc, it nevertheless represented, in Miller’s words, ‘a system of parallel diplomacy, based on the assumption that relations between Commonwealth members had a family quality which other sorts of international relations did not’.⁴⁴

³⁹ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton, 2007), p. 269.

⁴⁰ Gregory Barton, ‘The British World Model of World History’, *Britain and the World*, 5:1 (2012), p. 9.

⁴¹ ‘Memorandum - proposed Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - defence aspects’, TNA FO 371/84823.

⁴² M.S. Rajan, *Post-War Transformation of the Commonwealth*, (London, 1963), p. 45.

⁴³ Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford, 2014), p. 50.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Problems of Expansion and Attrition*, 384.

In addition to preserving British norms, couching the Commonwealth in familial language discouraged critical analysis. In 1964's 'The Realities of the Commonwealth', John W. Holmes argued that the Commonwealth 'suffered from the fact that the true believer defines it as a mystique – in language which can nauseate the sceptic and the outsider. Because the usual political terminology is inept, its nature has been encrusted with clichés'.⁴⁵ Yet Holmes himself lapsed into cliché, describing the Commonwealth as 'an organism which is the product of history – better described by historians than by political scientists'.⁴⁶ While it is true that political scientists tended to dismiss the Commonwealth as an historical accident, many historians have also neglected the Commonwealth in their accounts of 'summitry'; the twentieth-century innovation of national leaders meeting face-to-face rather than conducting diplomacy via envoys.⁴⁷ International relations theorist Jan Melissen noted that Commonwealth Conferences were the only 'serial summit' occurring before the 1970s.⁴⁸ Moreover, only rare historians have identified how the Conferences were a formative influence on other international bodies. Judith Brown observed that Nehru was 'obsessive about details' for the first Non-Aligned Movement conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, and 'drew upon forms and procedures observed at the Commonwealth conferences'.⁴⁹ This was not a unique example: in 1957 Nkrumah organised a conference of independent African states.⁵⁰ The mode of debate recommended by Ghanaian officials was clearly derived from the practice at Prime Ministers' Conferences: 'Each head of delegation ... may state the point of view of his government on the item under discussion, no

⁴⁵ John W. Holmes, 'The Realities of the Commonwealth', University of Manitoba, 23 January 1964, 'Speech and speech material 61-69: The Commonwealth', Papers of A.D.P. Heaney, LAC MG30-E144, volume 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Peter Calvocoressi, *World Politics since 1945* (London, 2009), p. 177; David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007), p. 403.

⁴⁸ Jan Melissen, *Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age* (Wassenaar, 2003), p. 10.

⁴⁹ Judith Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (Newhaven, 2003), p. 260.

⁵⁰ 'Conference of Independent African States', Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Ghana (PRAAD) RG 17/1/118.

attempt being made to debate the item so as to reach an agreed conclusion'.⁵¹ Furthermore, while the meeting was held in Accra, it was not organised through dispatches to African capitals, but rather 'through our high commissioner and the ambassadors of the participating states in London'.⁵² This shows how London was still the normative site for multilateral affairs; this pre-eminence enabled Britain to set terms for hosting Prime Ministers' Conferences in a manner that would appear presumptuous coming from newer states. In comparison, when in 1959 Nkrumah proposed to host a West African anglophone and francophone conference in Accra, Nigerian Prime Minister Balewa complained that 'I do not know who suggested that you should convene a meeting in Accra of the prime ministers and premiers of the various West African territories, it was certainly not my suggestion'. President of Liberia William S. Tubman objected that 'it infringes the dignity and honour of an independent state to have the chief of another independent state suggest a conference or conferences and he set the time, date and place'.⁵³ Yet the language of Nkrumah's invitation, suggesting a date 'for your consideration' was almost identical to the invitations issued by British prime ministers to Commonwealth leaders; the difference was that whereas Nkrumah was proposing something new, every organisational aspect of the Prime Ministers' Conference was shaped by precedent.⁵⁴

This thesis will have a particular focus on how British influence was sustained by constantly reaffirming the 'informality' of the Conferences; as both old and new members were reluctant to give the Commonwealth either standing orders or a standing committee, the operation of the Conferences was instead guided by 'custom'. This enabled Britain to retain its grasp of the administrative levers for longer; precedents from Imperial Conferences were never abrogated.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Balewa to Nkrumah, 1 March 1959, PRAAD RG 17/1/147; Tubman to Nkrumah, 5 March 1959, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Nkrumah to West African Prime Ministers, 23 February 1959, *ibid.*

These dual attributes of informality and continuity present particular challenges for the historian. Much of the historiography simply presents the Conferences as ‘always there’; biographies treat them as episodic junkets, and generalist works on the Commonwealth acknowledge their centrality without detailing their internal workings. For instance, in *The Commonwealth at Work*, Derek Ingram called the Conferences ‘one of the most remarkable phenomena in world affairs, for no other international organisation except the United Nations is able to bring such a variety of top political leaders together at one time’.⁵⁵ He concludes ‘This in itself is sufficient reason for it to be convened at least once every two years’, but gives no indication to the reader as to why leaders continued to attend a voluntary yet time-consuming summit.⁵⁶ There is the additional difficulty that many relevant works date back to the end of the period being examined.⁵⁷ The evolution of the Prime Ministers’ Conferences from 1944 to 1969 is critical to understanding the capabilities and limitations of the Commonwealth in tackling such issues in later decades, but is not adequately covered in the existing secondary literature. Therefore, this thesis draws largely upon archival sources; although here too the much-vaunted informality of the Conferences presents issues. There is no verbatim record to refer to; instead there are minutes created by British civil servants. Whilst these scrupulously detail the order of speakers and subjects covered – draft minutes were circulated to all delegations each day for approval – they smooth over imprecise and impassioned language. Therefore a key task was to ascertain the Conference atmosphere. Edited correspondence collections such as *Unofficial Channels*, which contain some direct quotations transcribed by advisors, were useful in this respect.⁵⁸ Transcripts of the nightly briefings Canadian Prime Ministers Diefenbaker and

⁵⁵ Ingram, *The Commonwealth at Work*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ For instance, Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London, 1969).

⁵⁸ Ian McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels: Letters between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner, 1946-1966* (Wellington, 1999).

Pearson gave to journalists were also helpful. Such sources indicate that the tenor of debate at the Conferences was genuinely informal. While the number of speeches from prepared notes increased over time, a readiness to interrupt remained. Delegates thumped tables when angry and broke out in spontaneous applause at the conclusion of impassioned speeches.⁵⁹

Equally, however, the thesis is not preoccupied with reconstructing every discussion around the Conference table, nor is it a biographical dictionary of prime ministers. Therefore biographies were used selectively and collections of personal papers were not examined, with the exceptions of Menzies of Australia, on account of his unbroken attendance record from 1949 to 1965, and Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, to compensate for a paucity of relevant West Indian archival sources.⁶⁰ Nonetheless official papers still included many indicators of prime ministerial personalities, such as margin notes, speech notes and correspondence from the public. Given the thesis' focus on the positioning of the Conferences as a 'non foreign' event, archival sources were primarily used to assess how this come about through the commonalities in approach adopted by civil servants across the Commonwealth. The thesis is conscious of the risks of imputing precise judgements to the 'official mind' on the basis of archival sources, best described in V.G. Kiernan's dictum that 'it is ... a delusion of archive searchers, who inhale a subtly intoxicating atmosphere and need its stimulus to keep them going, to suppose that ministers and under-secretaries are careful to leave behind them all the documents required for a verdict of their actions'.⁶¹ The thesis endeavours to at least partially hedge against such delusions by drawing upon national archives in eight Commonwealth capitals to build up a

⁵⁹ 'Commonwealth's Longest Week', *Observer*, 16 September 1962.

⁶⁰ Nehru's personal notebook of the 1960 Conference was also consulted at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Archive, New Delhi.

⁶¹ V.G. Kiernan, 'Farewells to Empire', p. 269, in William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization: Collected Essays* (London, 2006), p. 917.

documentary record and examine the similarities and differences in attitudes across administrations. While The National Archives in Kew were undeniably the most comprehensive resource, it was clear that the Conferences were uniformly considered a pivotal event by external affairs ministries; for instance the Ghanaian national archives contain comprehensive briefings including pre-drafted communiqués and press releases. The practicalities of inter-continental travel during the period also generated voluminous invoices, itineraries, and invitations, all of which highlight the emphasis laid upon the social role of the Conferences – not least because Britain paid for the hotel expenses of visiting delegations.

To conclude, the abundance of relevant primary sources is as notable as the lack of secondary literature which concentrates on the Conferences. Few journal articles have made any attempt to study the Conferences collectively, a rare example being Michael O’Neill’s ‘Militancy and Accommodation: The Influence of the Heads of Government Meetings on the Commonwealth, 1960-1969’ which looks at the rise of caucusing.⁶² Some articles have looked at multiple Conferences, but usually to reach conclusions on a single topic, such as Rhodesia.⁶³ This thesis makes an original contribution to the literature by a close study of the Conferences as a distinctive genre of international diplomacy – or indeed, a deliberate attempt to avoid the strictures of ‘foreign’ diplomacy. It could be argued that the dearth of literature on the Conferences is a sign of irrelevance, but over the following six chapters the thesis will demonstrate that examining the structure of the Conferences – their substantive transformation while retaining an unchanging outward form – sheds new light on the flashpoint topics of white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia, and Britain’s economic and political relationship

⁶² Michael O’Neill, ‘Militancy and Accommodation: The Influence of the Heads of Government Meetings on the Commonwealth, 1960-1969’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 12:3 (1983), pp. 211-232.

⁶³ Carl Watts, ‘Dilemmas of Intra-Commonwealth Representation during the Rhodesian Problem, 1964–65’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45:3 (2007), pp. 323-344.

with Europe, the latter of which remains a pivotal contemporary issue. The thesis also has a broader significance in presenting the Conferences as the exemplar of Britain's attempts to refashion its Empire into something it hoped would sustain its global influence after decolonisation.

The first chapter looks extensively at the role of London as a site for the Conferences, serving as a social as well as political hub. The second chapter will provide a chronology of the changes in form and content of the Conferences up until 1961, while the third chapter will scrutinise how the Conferences handled the twin tensions of Britain's determination to apply for EEC membership and discontent over UDI. These two chapters work together to illustrate the great extent of continuity in procedure and perceptible informality that remained even as consensus became fragmented. The fourth chapter will highlight the remarkable personal agency that the Conferences accorded to individual leaders, and how the aggregation of personalities impacted the outcomes of deliberations. The fifth chapter will look at how the supposedly private Conferences became the foremost public marker of the Commonwealth 'concept'; journalists and publicity officers made the Conferences into a recurrent setting for commentary on the purpose of the Commonwealth and its role in international affairs. Finally, the sixth chapter will engage in a close reading of the communiqués, arguing that in spite of their ambiguity, they played a vital role in driving the assembled prime ministers to make conclusions.

Chapter One:

Meeting in the Metropole: A Shared Capital?

‘Imagine – eleven or twelve years ago I was walking down in those streets, my precious shoe soles wearing thin, following coal carts in the hope that a few lumps would fall off, cadging fish heads ... I used to gaze into the windows of grand hotels such as this ... I just fancied myself as a waiter here! The tips would be so good. And now – it’s fantastic, isn’t it? Here I am in a grand hotel as an honoured guest!’¹

Kwame Nkrumah’s excitement at being in London for the 1957 Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference is indicative of the powerful role the capital played as the site of the Conferences. For many leaders from the new Commonwealth, coming to London as prime minister was the apex of a transformation from having first encountered London as impoverished students or exiled dissidents. Meanwhile, for many old Commonwealth prime ministers, London was a cultural touchstone; home of the ‘mother of parliaments’ and bulwark against the Blitz. In 1951 the *Daily Telegraph* declared that New Zealand Prime Minister Sidney Holland had ‘escaped last night for an hour or two ... he wandered about London at leisure, travelling by tube instead of official car, and observing quietly the way Londoners spend their evenings.’² Holland was as fascinated by the commuters on the Underground as Nkrumah had been by the inhabitants of grand hotels. London’s multifaceted nature made it a de facto Commonwealth capital even in a post-imperial age. Many other host cities were mooted but with the sole exception of Lagos in January 1966, London played host to every Prime Ministers’ Conference. This chapter will consider the practical and tactical reasons why this occurred. It will assess the impact the spatial and social surrounds had on the Conferences, arguing that the British government retained significant agency by hosting – controlling the agenda and timing

¹ Erica Powell, *Private Secretary (Female)/Gold Coast* (London, 1984), p. 113.

² ‘A Prime Minister Escapes’, *Daily Telegraph* (London), 11 January 1951.

while couching its power in terms of courtesy and hospitality. Equally, visiting leaders benefited from the vociferous press and influential diplomatic community which London offered; social niceties did not inhibit visitors from putting their host 'in the dock'.³

It is paradoxical that one of the first proposals to make the Commonwealth less anglocentric - hosting a Conference outside Britain - was one of the last to be adopted. Suggesting the meeting be held elsewhere was almost a ritual, even before the first Prime Ministers' Conference in 1944. Especially in wartime there were strong arguments, both pragmatic and symbolic, for a Conference outside Britain. The last official gathering of Commonwealth leaders had been the 1937 Imperial Conference, during which Stanley Baldwin retired as British Prime Minister and Neville Chamberlain assumed the prime ministership and with it the chair of the Conference. It was not until April 1940, the last month of the Chamberlain administration, that British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden wrote to Commonwealth prime ministers proposing holding another Imperial Conference.⁴ By the end of 1940 the Blitz had made any gathering in London difficult and in August 1941 Australian Prime Minister John Curtin stated that the War in the Pacific necessitated he remain in Australia.⁵ Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was opposed to a Conference in London, fearing it would be seen as signalling the formation of an Imperial War Cabinet similar to that of the First World War. Instead of travelling to London, King hosted United States President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the Quebec Conferences of August 1943 and September 1944, and suggested a similar locale when Churchill renewed proposals for a Commonwealth Conference. Canadian High Commissioner Vincent Massey reminded Dominions Secretary Viscount Cranborne that a Canadian venue would enable Churchill to travel via Washington

³ J.R.T. Wood, 'A Matter of Weeks Rather Than Months': *The Impasse Between Harold Wilson and Ian Smith: Sanctions, Aborted Settlements and War 1965-1969* (Bloomington, 2012), p. 147.

⁴ W.A.W. Clark to Edward Bridges, 30 April 1944, TNA CAB 21/851.

⁵ *Ibid.*

for another round of talks with Roosevelt.⁶ Churchill admitted it was an ‘attractive proposal’ but wrote to King in March 1944 stating that his parliamentary schedule tied him to London.⁷ Thus Churchill’s decision to hold the Conference in London was driven primarily by convenience. Whereas Imperial Conferences were typically held in St. James’s Palace, the Prime Ministers’ Conference was held in the cabinet room in 10 Downing Street, meaning Churchill did not even have to leave the house.

If King’s proposal had been accepted, the tenor of the Conferences would have undoubtedly been different. Massey outlined the Canadian proposal to ‘take over either the Citadelle at Quebec or the Seignior Club, which lies some fifty miles east of Ottawa, for the meeting. The latter, a pleasant place amidst beautiful surroundings, would be admirable for the Conference’.⁸ The tendency of both participants and commentators to refer to the Commonwealth as a ‘club’ would have been reinforced if its discussions had actually taken place in a country club. The air of exclusivity would have at least been counterbalanced by equalising domestic arrangements. While in London delegates stayed in a variety of hotels, under the Canadian plan ‘the prime ministers and their advisors would be comfortably housed as a community together’.⁹ Hosting the Conference at No. 10 avoided any impression of holidaying, but it also had connotations of an Imperial War Cabinet. Hence King emphasised that Commonwealth relations were centred on the ‘continuous conference of cabinets’, in which each prime minister made commitments only in consultation with their cabinet.¹⁰ Yet King’s alternative vision of a meeting in the Citadelle or Canadian hinterland, distant from high commissions, would have made communication home more difficult. King’s proposal had more in common with a summit

⁶ Massey to Cranborne, 2 March 1944, ‘King 1944: Massey-McLean’, LAC MG26-J1, volume 366, microfilm reel C-7053.

⁷ Churchill to King, 6 March 1944, *ibid.*

⁸ Massey to Cranborne, 2 March 1944, *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J.W. Pickersgill (ed.), *The Mackenzie King Record: Volume 1, 1939-1944* (Toronto, 1960), p. 239.

meeting, such as those held between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill in places like Yalta, with their emphasis on personal negotiations. The concept of meeting away from the centre of power was a persistent one for Canadian leaders. When Canada hosted the 1973 CHOGM, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced a two day retreat at Mont-Tremblant, to which leaders could bring only their spouse and one advisor.¹¹ The retreat was intended to return to the informality of Prime Ministers' Conferences, at which leaders could build up a personal rapport.

In 1944, however, there was no need to impose a relationship-building exercise upon the prime ministers. They were all known to each other and the gathering was smaller than the Imperial Conferences of the past. The compact cabinet room acted as a cap on the number of advisors present and its relatively austere décor symbolised the fact that prime ministers were not treated as distant visitors, fêted in ornate state rooms, but as colleagues on a working visit. Whilst stripping away much of the pomp that had characterised Imperial Conferences was appropriate during wartime, it risked deemphasising the autonomy of the dominions. Sessions were held in the map room at No. 10 to fit in with Churchill's schedule.¹² While visiting leaders were advised not to bring ministers or high commissioners to the Conference, British ministers continued to attend on the same scale as the Imperial Conferences. When Curtin proposed bringing a minister with him, it was 'tactfully intimated to him that a meeting of prime ministers only is proposed'.¹³ Yet at one session thirteen British ministers were in attendance.¹⁴ When Churchill was informed that the dominion high commissioners 'resented' their exclusion, he was bewildered by their complaints, arguing that 'this is a peculiar question ... being a government of all parties we are not united on this topic. Even so there will be eleven dominions

¹¹ Stuart Mole, 'From Smith to Sharma: the Role of the Commonwealth Secretary-General', in James Mayall (ed.) *The Contemporary Commonwealth: An Assessment 1965-2009* (Oxford, 2009), p. 46.

¹² Clark to Bridges, 30 April 1944, TNA CAB 21/851.

¹³ Acting British High Commissioner, Canada, to Mackenzie King, 29 February 1944, 'King 1944: Massey-McLean', LAC MG26-J1, volume 366, microfilm reel C-7053.

¹⁴ Bridges to Churchill, 6 May 1944, TNA CAB 21/851.

representatives, Mr. Amery should be counted as one, as he only comes on account of India, making twelve, and the same number representing the United Kingdom'.¹⁵ Churchill's idea that his government should have greater representation because it was a coalition was novel; it is unlikely that Australia would be been accorded more representatives if it had formed a national government, as mooted following the 1940 Australian election.¹⁶ In any case, having a British delegation larger than all the dominions combined was a retrograde step from the Imperial Conferences and highlighted a tension in the intermediate position occupied by dominion prime ministers. They were neither domestic politicians who could be incorporated into British cabinet debates without regard to their own national politics, nor were they foreign statesmen with whom talks would entail diplomatic negotiations and the presence of interpreters. The 1944 Conference thus had an ambiguous character, less imperial than its predecessor, but also more unilateral.

Given that the discussions themselves were accompanied by a minimum of ceremony, it is striking how much of the social programme associated with the Imperial Conferences was retained. The number of documents circulated beforehand had been reduced due to rationing, a decision the Australian delegation made creative use of: 'Shedden agreed with what we said about keeping the amount of paper down to a minimum, and said that this time he had filled a suitcase with cigarettes, matches and other things of which he heard we were short!'.¹⁷ Yet there was no corresponding reduction in the number of social events, with the Australians reporting that they were 'rather embarrassed by the number of invitations they received to attend official or semi-official parties during the course of the meetings'.¹⁸ Mackenzie King suspected that the volume of hospitality was a British ploy to distract delegates, writing in his diary: 'What annoys

¹⁵ Churchill to Bridges, 6 May 1944, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Patrick Moray Weller, *Cabinet Government in Australia, 1901-2006* (Sydney, 2007), p. 84.

¹⁷ Clark to Bridges, 30 April 1944, TNA CAB 21/851.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

me is the social devices and other attentions paid with a view to getting some things done, to influence one's mind even against one's better judgement.' King congratulated himself on his asceticism: 'I think I have gone through this battle without wavering'.¹⁹ Yet he was still susceptible to flattery by other means, eagerly accepting an invitation to address members of both Houses of Parliament. It is perhaps no coincidence that King, the most fastidious of visitors in stressing national autonomy, was the one invited to address Parliament, an honour which in later decades became associated with state visits by foreign leaders. He used the platform to discourage innovations in Commonwealth consultation, 'lest in changing the form, we lose the substance'.²⁰ This was a pre-emptive rebuff of the Australian proposal for an Empire Secretariat, which Curtin had signalled he wished to discuss at the Conference.²¹ Whilst never likely to persuade King, who had an instinctive distrust of any institutionalisation of the Commonwealth, Curtin's plan would have relieved some of the pressure on prime ministers to personally conduct Commonwealth relations through the Conferences. Under the proposals, representatives from the dominions with specific responsibility for the Commonwealth would have been based in London. Instead, everyone from government agencies to 'loyal societies' insisted on having direct access to visiting prime ministers during the Conferences. Hence a plethora of luncheons, banquets and speeches were compressed into the few weeks, making enthusiasm for the Commonwealth appear episodic rather than sustained.

Furthermore, in the absence of any institutional structure in London, high commissioners tended to have a dual role as dominion representatives in Britain but also as an unofficial Commonwealth body. To compensate for dismissing Curtin's proposal, the 1944 Conference communiqué promised monthly meetings between high commissioners and the British prime

¹⁹ Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London, 1969), p. 384.

²⁰ 'Text of Prime Minister King's Speech to Houses of Parliament in London', *Ottawa Journal*, 11 May 1944.

²¹ James Curran, "'An Organic Part of the Whole Structure": John Curtin's Empire', in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37:1 (March 2009), p. 51.

minister, in addition to their regular meetings with the dominions secretary. Yet the scheduled meetings with the prime minister lapsed within the year.²² A problem with using the high commissioners as a sounding board was that they did not necessarily have the full confidence of their home governments. As Kandle's book on Imperial Conferences asserted, high commissioners 'were either men past their prime or individuals whose continued presence in a dominion had become inconvenient'.²³ This perpetuated 'a belief already prevalent in British government circles that "colonials" lacked the experience and ability to fulfil ambassadorial roles'.²⁴ Thus substantive discussions were reserved for direct correspondence between prime ministers, or held over until the Conferences. The Second World War greatly increased the amount of material transmitted via high commissioners, but it did not settle questions over their status. Australians negotiated for their high commissioner (and former prime minister) Stanley Bruce to attend the War Cabinet but this breakthrough was stymied as Churchill regularly failed to inform Bruce when the meetings were being held.²⁵ The tension over the proper role for high commissioners was illustrated by the fact that much of the 1948 Prime Ministers' Conference was dedicated to debating whether high commissioners should be ranked above, below or alongside ambassadors, or if the title itself should be discarded. It was decided to rank high commissioners in order of their length of time in the position, rather than the seniority of their country, a practice which hitherto guaranteed that Britain had the senior high commissioner in each Commonwealth capital.²⁶ Yet the greatest interest was in the order of precedence in London; while it was agreed to accord high commissioners almost all the privileges of ambassadors, it was also determined that ministers from Commonwealth countries visiting London would outrank high commissioners, unlike visiting ministers from foreign countries

²² Nicholas Mansergh, *Problems of Wartime Co-operation and Post-War Change* (London, 1958), p. 186.

²³ John Edward Kandle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 1887-1911: A Study in Imperial Organization* (London, 1967), p. 224.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Note by Bruce of conversation with Attlee, in W.J. Hudson and H.J.W. Stokes (eds), *Documents in Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49, Volume 6: July 1942-December 1943* (Canberra, 1983), p. 129.

²⁶ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a Difference: The Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner 1880-2006* (Leiden, 2007), p. 120.

and their ambassadors.²⁷ This maintained the principle that high commissioners were representatives of governments and hence subordinate to ministers of that government, whereas ambassadors were representatives of heads of state, and as such outranked ministers. Nevertheless, high commissioners in London continued to act as a Commonwealth advisory body. Even when the Commonwealth Secretariat was established in 1965, members did not accredit permanent representatives to it, as was the case with many other international organisations. Instead it was the high commissioners who were given oversight of the budget.²⁸ It could be argued that this was expedient, as London was the only Commonwealth capital in which all member nations had a mission. Yet such multilateral elements within the essentially bilateral role of high commissioner to Britain reinforced the way in which London was the de facto Commonwealth capital.

London's pre-eminence as a venue for the Conferences may appear self-explanatory inasmuch as it was one of the few Commonwealth countries in which the capital was also the foremost city. Much like written constitutions, planned capitals were a feature of British rule which was not practiced at home. Canada and Australia built new capitals as part of their federal compacts, while in South Africa the three branches of government were split across three cities as part of the formation of the Union in 1910. Wellington in New Zealand was not a planned capital but it became the seat of government only fifteen years after its foundation because it was usefully located on the strait separating the North and South Islands. In India, a planned capital was built in the heart of an ancient one. Until Ghana and Malaya joined in 1957, Ceylon had the only other capital which was also the largest city. Within fifteen years of partition, Pakistan's capital had moved from Karachi to Islamabad via Rawalpindi. The fashion for moving capitals

²⁷ *London Gazette*, 24 December 1948, in Heather J. Harvey, *Consultation and Co-operation in the Commonwealth: A Handbook on Methods and Practice* (London, 1952), p. 169.

²⁸ Margaret Doxey, 'The Commonwealth Secretary-General: Limits of Leadership', *International Affairs*, 55:1 (1979), p. 69.

continued, with President of Malawi Hastings Banda petitioning Britain in 1965 for funding to transfer the capital from Zomba to Lilongwe.²⁹ This predilection for building planned capitals should not, however, have forestalled hosting a Conference; even rural Canberra was sufficiently developed to host a meeting of Commonwealth ministers in 1947 to determine terms for the Japanese peace treaty.³⁰ Moreover, there was already a precedent for a meeting outside London: the 1932 Imperial Conference in Ottawa, which had been one of the most meaningful in the series, establishing the framework of imperial trade preferences. The disinclination to meet outside London was puzzling, given Mackenzie King's suggestion in 1944, while in 1948 even King George VI had declared 'I hope that opportunity will be found from time to time to hold some of our meetings in other Commonwealth capitals'.³¹ The King's use of 'our' appeared to diminish the argument that gathering in London was necessary for access to the monarch. It could be a use of the royal pronoun, but given that by 1948 Canada and South Africa had hosted royal tours, 'our' also carried the implication that a Conference outside Britain would warrant a royal visit. The other inference was that Conferences would be held in capitals. There was seemingly nothing other than provincial rivalries preventing prime ministers hosting Conferences outside their capitals, yet the assumption was persistent. There were practical considerations, such as hosts requiring access to civil servants, and visitors requiring the support of their high commissions. Yet it was also indicative of the British gift for turning coincidence into convention. There was no definitive declaration that the Prime Ministers' Conferences had displaced the Imperial Conferences; the change was effected simply through renaming and the downplaying the formality, to the extent that the Prime Ministers' Conferences seemed enmeshed in the routine of the host government. The 1946 Conference stretched over five weeks, with meetings scheduled around British Prime Minister Clement

²⁹ After a ten year building programme the capital moved in 1975. 'Brief for discussion with Dr Banda', TNA CAB 133/305.

³⁰ 'Japan Peace Settlement: Canberra Conference Verbatim Minutes', TNA DO 35/2830.

³¹ 'The King's Speech at Buckingham Palace on the 13th October', 'External Affairs: Commonwealth Conferences: Correspondence and Memoranda 1948-49', LAC MG26-L, volume 233.

Attlee's parliamentary appearances and cabinet meetings. On occasion, visiting prime ministers joined British cabinet meetings. Menzies attended meetings of Attlee's cabinet regarding Korea in 1950, and in 1952 six prime ministers attended a meeting of Churchill's cabinet regarding foreign affairs.³² As late as 1959 Menzies participated in a meeting of British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's cabinet regarding the Soviet Union.³³ Similarly, on his Commonwealth tour in 1958 Macmillan attended cabinet meetings in Wellington and Canberra.³⁴ It may therefore have appeared that a Conference outside London would need to be comparable to one in Whitehall, including invitations to cabinet.

However, it is more likely that the reluctance to move away from London rested on the Commonwealth's firm emphasis on seniority. All documentation, such as minutes and directories, listed the delegations in the order in which they attained dominion status or independence, with Canada preceding Australia and so forth. More importantly, it was almost always the practice for prime ministers to speak in order of their country's seniority, even though it would have been more logical to proceed in order of seniority in office.³⁵ For instance, Diefenbaker was expected to be the first respondent on most agenda items at the 1957 Conference even though he had only been in office less than a week. As with many Commonwealth conventions, there was no explicit requirement for this practice, but it helps explain the pervasive assumption that Canada should host the first Prime Ministers' Conference outside Britain. The seniority principle made this problematic, for it implied that the Conferences would rotate around until reaching an obvious hurdle: South Africa. The Nationalist government elected in 1948 would have objected if a Conference was held anywhere

³² Gill Bennett, *Six Moments of Crisis: Inside British Foreign Policy* (Oxford, 2013), p. 21; 'Biggest cabinet for twenty years: six Commonwealth premiers to attend', *Guardian*, 3 December 1952.

³³ 'Mr. Menzies Briefed for Summit Talks Mission', *The Age* (Melbourne), 16 June 1959, p. 1.

³⁴ Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm: 1956-1959* (London, 1971), p. 399; *ibid.* p. 404.

³⁵ 'South Africa Memorandum for Files', 10 February 1961, 'Commonwealth - London', LAC MG31-E83, volume 4, file 10, R3969-602-2-E.

in the new Commonwealth before it had taken a turn. In 1957 South African Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom proposed that Conferences should be held successively in different capitals, with the implicit subtext that South Africa would be included in the rotation.³⁶ Earlier that year, Menzies encouraged Macmillan to consider the prospect, declaring that a Conference in Pretoria held ‘an utter fascination for me’.³⁷ The British High Commission in Canberra dismissed the suggestion as an ‘impish mood’ of Menzies, but as late as 1959 Menzies sounded out the Canadian High Commissioner to Australia, Terence MacDermott, regarding the prospect. MacDermott suggested there were two obstacles: would the Queen be invited to attend, and would the non-white delegations be treated equally? He observed that there ‘could not be two categories of hospitality’.³⁸ Hospitality proved decisive in the debate over South Africa’s membership at the 1961 Conference; South African Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd’s declaration that non-white diplomats would not be able to live in white residential districts was a personal affront to new Commonwealth leaders. Perhaps Menzies kept putting South Africa forward as a potential host in the hope that Verwoerd would make a concession if there was a real prospect of him hosting a Conference, rather than an abstract discussion about accepting non-white prime ministers. The consensus, however, seemed to be that convening in London rather than on rotation was necessary to avoid a confrontation with South Africa, at least until the numerical balance in the Commonwealth favoured non-white states.

A further difficulty was that in a Cold War climate, a move away from London could be perceived internationally as a further blow to Britain’s claim to retain great power status. Conversely, a Conference outside London would have highlighted the equality of Commonwealth members. The Colombo Meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers in

³⁶ G.W. Tory, Deputy British High Commissioner to Australia, to H. Lintott, CRO, 8 May 1957, TNA DO 35/5174.

³⁷ Menzies to Macmillan, 19 February 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

³⁸ MacDermott to Menzies, 9 January 1959, Papers of Sir Robert Menzies, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 9.

1950 usefully emphasised Ceylon's independence in the face of the Soviet veto of its United Nations membership.³⁹ Given the symbolic import that would be attached to a change in Conference location, officials looked for some historical justification. In 1955 Canada espoused a 'completely informal' method of determining location be adopted, yet it also provided a list of significant dates across the Commonwealth up to the 1967 centenary of Canadian confederation.⁴⁰ It even noted that 1960 would be the fiftieth anniversary of the Union of South Africa. In spite of attempts to find a milestone to mark, current events took precedence. In the wake of the Suez conflict, Macmillan complained that the British Labour Party was calling for an urgent Conference, as it 'suits them to maintain that we have shaken the Commonwealth fatally by our Suez policy and are not ready to have a conference for that reason'.⁴¹ Labour was justified in perceiving Macmillan as vulnerable, for he had privately proposed that that the Commonwealth do 'something a little unusual' and hold the conference in Canada.⁴² Assistant Under-Secretary of the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) St John Chadwick conceded that 'there is much that might be said ... for a meeting in Ottawa which to the Asians at least would, Suez-wise, look like neutral ground'.⁴³ Conversely, the press and public would have seen it as an attempt to side-step Suez, whereas *The Economist* argued that meeting in London would serve as a 'token of reconciliation'.⁴⁴

Plans to meet in Canada were set aside because the proposed dates were shortly after the 1957 Canadian election. Yet this indicated a double standard; while proposals to convene outside London were deferred for fear of influencing elections or having inexperienced hosts in the event of a change in government, British leaders had few qualms using Conference timing for

³⁹ Until 1955 the Soviet Union argued Ceylon was a client state due to its defence agreement with Britain.

⁴⁰ 'Location of Future Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences', 8 June 1956, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1956', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4776, file 50085-F-40.

⁴¹ Macmillan to Home, 28 January 1957, in TNA DO 35/5173.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ St John Chadwick to A.W. Snelling, 21 February 1957, in TNA DO 35/5173.

⁴⁴ 'June Rendezvous in London', *The Economist*, 20 April 1957.

political ends. Lester Pearson commented that the lack of controversial issues on the 1951 Conference agenda lent 'credence to the idea that the main purpose of the meeting is to strengthen the Labour government before the forthcoming elections in the United Kingdom'.⁴⁵ Britain was prepared to offload lesser meetings, such as the economic conference Diefenbaker espoused in 1957; Treasury official and later Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend determined that 'the likely agenda will hardly provide enough meat for a Conference at Prime Ministerial level; the possibilities of it succeeding are not great enough to induce us to have it in London, under a United Kingdom chairman'. Yet Trend felt that Britain could nonetheless veto alternative venues: 'Delhi should clearly be avoided, since the conference would then be diverted towards a discussion of assistance for under-developed countries'.⁴⁶ Hosting a Conference was also an opportunity for British prime ministers to stamp their authority on domestic politics. This was particularly useful for those who came to power between elections. The 1957 Conference positioned Macmillan as a conciliatory figure in the wake of Eden's Suez policy, while Alec Douglas-Home was able to use his skills as a former Commonwealth Relations Secretary to host a successful Conference in the run up to the 1964 election. Indeed, Menzies encouraged Douglas-Home to use the Conference for domestic purposes, writing 'I think there would be value to you in a meeting before your election. After all, your Labour opponents have rather tended to appropriate the Commonwealth idea and make themselves the public champions'. Menzies even promised to publicly assist his fellow conservative: 'If it is at all possible, I would like the conference to occur before your election. After all, neutral as I am when I am in London, I have not entirely lost my capacity for a little studied indiscretion'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Escott Reid to St Laurent, 6 November 1950, 'External Affairs: Commonwealth Conferences: Correspondence and Memoranda 1948-49', LAC MG26-L, volume 233.

⁴⁶ Trend to Macmillan, 18 September 1957, TNA PREM 11/2533, in Tim Rooth, 'Britain, Europe and Diefenbaker's Trade Diversion Proposals, 1957-58', in Phillip Buckner (ed.), *Canada and the End of Empire* (Vancouver, 2005), p. 122.

⁴⁷ Menzies to Douglas-Home, 6 February 1964, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 7.

The final important factor in Britain's perseverance as host was the popular appeal of London. This took many forms; some emotional, some pragmatic, but all coalescing to keep the Conferences in London. For instance, Menzies believed that meeting in London had a moderating effect. He felt new Commonwealth leaders 'should be "exposed" to the influences of London, should see the Queen and the mother of parliaments and should be duly impressed with the fundamental significance of the Commonwealth association'.⁴⁸ Such sentiments appear patronising, but they aligned with the aspirations of many delegates, who had been anglocentrically schooled before independence. The Indian High Commission in Lagos observed in 1964 that 'the standard Nigerian ambition to this day is to be a "been-to" (one who has been to London). Even today civil servants go on "home leave" to the United Kingdom'.⁴⁹ Given this mindset, a position in a delegation was a prize to be awarded by prime ministers, sometimes to those outside the usual departments of external affairs and trade. For example, the Sierra Leonean entourage in 1965 included the general manager of the railways department.⁵⁰ Similarly, the scale of delegations was not necessarily in proportion to population or economic size: in 1965 the Nigerian delegation was the largest, followed closely by newly independent Zambia.⁵¹ Such practices were not, however, an invention of new Commonwealth countries. In 1953, Sidney Holland brought along his lands and labour ministers 'because every other prime minister at the last Prime Ministers' Conference had ministers in attendance'.⁵² Commonwealth Relations Secretary Lord Swinton responded with what New Zealand Deputy High Commissioner Frank Corner described as 'a general feeling of outrage at the suggestion that the prime minister should bring two ministers whose portfolios had nothing to do with the subject

⁴⁸ Tory to Lintott, 28 May 1957, in TNA DO 35/5174.

⁴⁹ B. Deva Rao to Singh, Ministry of External Affairs, 29 July 1964, National Archives of India (NAI) HI/1012/71/64.

⁵⁰ 'Prime Ministers' Conference June 1965: Directories', 'Canadian Papers Prepared for Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, file 5, R5276-62-X-E.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Holland to New Zealand High Commissioner in London, Frederick Doidge, 10 April 1953, in 'Commonwealth Affairs - Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, June 1953 - General', Archives New Zealand (ANZ) ACIE 8798 EA1/79, EA 153/35/1.

under discussion; and the transparency of the attempt to have the United Kingdom pay for them was apparent to all concerned'.⁵³ Holland was unrepentant, arguing that 'it would be good training for Sullivan, number three in the cabinet, to attend'. Corner reported that 'Swinton, shocked, said he'd never realised that this was a function of the Conferences'.⁵⁴ Arguably, this is disingenuous of Swinton, given that one of the benefits of hosting the Conferences for Britain was the perpetuation of British administrative norms. Meeting in the cabinet room and conducting the Conference along cabinet lines was intended to encourage members to persist with the model of responsible government which they had been bequeathed in the lead up to independence. In the case of Ghana, the British government literally tried to promote cabinet government by commissioning an elaborate cabinet table and sending it to Accra as a gift in 1959, when Nkrumah was mulling a move to an executive presidency.⁵⁵ For many prime ministers, sitting around the cabinet table was less of a learning experience and more of a moment of fulfilment. In a sense, they were superseding the colonial secretaries who had spoken on their behalf for so long. Ceylonese Prime Minister John Kotelawala wrote that:

There was something of the ironic in the presence of Nehru of India and Mohammed Ali of Pakistan and myself of Ceylon amid the company that assembled in the Cabinet Room. But it was not only Britain's gesture to inevitability but a token of the sanity with which she accepts the inevitable; the sanity of true greatness.⁵⁶

Meeting in a room from which their countries had been governed did not appear to induce resentment, but rather a feeling of taking their rightful place in a historic setting. As Kotelawala put it: 'The Cabinet Room itself presents no unusual attractions to the stranger, but the sense of history quickens the student's pulse as he surveys walls on which the invisible murals of great happenings can be discerned by the eye of imagination'.⁵⁷

⁵³ Frank Corner to Alister McIntosh, 14 April 1953, Papers of Sir Alister McIntosh, National Library New Zealand (NLNZ), MS-6759-251.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Listowel to Nkrumah, 17 May 1959, PRAAD RG/17/1/370.

⁵⁶ John Kotelawala, *An Asian Prime Minister's Story* (London, 1956), p. 155.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

While many new leaders enthused about being able to sit as equals in No. 10, Britain was equally keen to secure their attendance as an outward sign of the success of the Commonwealth concept. Given that the discussions themselves were secret, Britain sometimes appeared more concerned at getting 'first class attendance' in order to preserve its international prestige than with the agenda.⁵⁸ For example, Macmillan's planning for the 1960 Conference was predicated on the need to be seen meeting. He noted: "There should be a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in 1961. This should not be held only to deal with South Africa. We should try to have an agenda of a more respectable kind."⁵⁹ He settled upon disarmament as a theme, but his schema was remarkably vague: "We might prepare a paper on the history, the difficulties and the problems of disarmament, and explain what has gone wrong in the past. We could send this to them and suggest that we should all meet and look at this".⁶⁰ Similarly, British officials tried to think of 'a rabbit to bring out of the hat' before they issued invitations in 1957, only to concede 'there will certainly be great difficulty in devising one'.⁶¹ This illustrates the challenge presented by the lack of a fixed timetable for Conferences; whereas some had a clear current issue to discuss, others were called because they were perceived to be overdue. In such cases, scheduling was designed to maximise turnout. The CRO drew up a chart of Commonwealth parliamentary timetables, aiming to avoid giving reluctant attendees such as South Africa a chance to excuse themselves on parliamentary grounds.⁶² British High Commissioner to South Africa Evelyn Baring complained that Prime Minister Daniel Malan gave 'not very convincing excuses for non-attendance'.⁶³ Malan claimed that November 1950 was impossible as 'during that month ministers were preparing for the coming parliamentary session', while January 1951 was unacceptable as 'he had promised to unveil a memorial of great significance in a Free State

⁵⁸ Lintott to Home, 8 February 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

⁵⁹ Note by the Prime Minister, 23 October 1960, TNA FO 371/149454.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ H.A.F. Rumbold to Home, 7 February 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

⁶² Chadwick to A.W. Snelling, 21 February 1957, *ibid.*

⁶³ Evelyn Baring to CRO, 21 October 1950, TNA FO 371/84823.

town'.⁶⁴ Conversely, New Zealand leaders were largely taken for granted; in 1957 Holland said that a mid-year Conference would be 'very difficult for him to attend, but "he would not let the Empire down"'.⁶⁵ The pivotal figure was Nehru; just as in 1949 where the importance of keeping India in the Commonwealth had prevailed over the commonality of monarchy, in the 1950s Nehru's presence was judged essential to avoid the appearance of a rupture. In 1957 CRO Assistant Under-Secretary Arthur Snelling argued 'it might have tragic consequences for the Commonwealth if we were to arrange a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference which India refused to attend'.⁶⁶ In particular, British officials feared a domino effect whereby other 'new' Commonwealth leaders would absent themselves if Nehru declined to appear; as Snelling said of Nkrumah: 'would he come if India stayed away?'.⁶⁷

To avoid any prospect of poor attendance or a boycott, 'elaborate soundings' were taken by British high commissioners.⁶⁸ In spite of the supposed equality between the old and new Commonwealth, leaders such as Menzies were typically approached first.⁶⁹ This was partly because officials had less confidence in the discretion of the new dominions. In 1949 the British High Commissioner to Pakistan joked about the 'usual leakage in Colombo'.⁷⁰ High commissioners were instructed to lay on transport for reluctant attendees. In 1950 Evelyn Baring was:

authorised to say that if Dr Malan would wish his wife to accompany him it would give us the greatest pleasure to receive her and that we should like her also to be our guest. You could also express the Prime Minister's hope that the early notice being given now may enable Dr Malan to avoid a tiring flight by air and travel in more comfort by sea.⁷¹

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ D.L. Cole to Chadwick, 28 March 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

⁶⁶ Snelling to Lintott, 16 February 1957, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Chadwick to Snelling, 21 February 1957, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Laurence Grafftey-Smith to Percivale Liesching, 28 April 1949, in 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference London 1949 - Minutes of Meetings and Matters Arising', TNA DO 35/2209.

⁷¹ CRO to Baring, 20 October 1950, in 'Redraft of Explanatory Memorandum to High Commissioners', TNA FO 371/84823.

It was clear that the assisted passage was meant as an inducement: ‘the invitation to Mrs. Malan is an exception and a similar invitation is not being conveyed to other Prime Ministers at this stage. Nor would a similar invitation apply to the wife of any minister Dr Malan might send in his place’.⁷² Such attempts to position the Conference as a holiday were not rare. Before the jet age, prime ministers could justify traveling indirectly. Menzies arrived in London in 1953 via the United States, including an overland leg on the luxurious *Twentieth Century Limited* train.⁷³

Mackenzie King tried to use his status to secure upgrades on Cunard transatlantic liners:

I wonder if head officials in London would not consider giving to me, as Prime Minister of Canada ... some special consideration in matter of accommodation both ways ... I hesitate to incur a large outlay for a suite. On the other hand I feel, as Prime Minister of Canada, I should at least have a sitting room as well as a bedroom.⁷⁴

In 1957 Nkrumah was encouraged to travel by sea to get some respite after Ghana’s independence celebrations. He enjoyed the voyage so much that the liner’s return was delayed until the end of the Conference so that his delegation could re-join the ship. The chance to eke out some leisure time without facing domestic criticism was one of the reasons Conferences were well attended. Invitations were personalised to emphasise the pastimes thought most likely to appeal. Thus Douglas-Home wrote to Menzies ‘I would value your views and no doubt we shall see you here for the Lords test match’.⁷⁵ Similarly, accommodation was tailored to leaders’ preferences. The Australians invariably chose The Savoy, near Australia House, while the Tunku preferred The Ritz. One of the few things India and Pakistan agreed on was a fondness for Claridge’s. In 1949 Pakistani Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan requested a specific suite as he had previously shared it with Pakistani independence leader and Governor-General Muhammad Ali Jinnah and ‘attached sentimental value to it’.⁷⁶ By accommodating such requests, British officials made the Conferences an inviting part of each leader’s calendar.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ McKenna to Jacob E. Smart, 8 May 1953, NAA A1209 1958/5126.

⁷⁴ King to Norman Robertson, 26 August 1948, ‘King 1948: Robertson - Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations’, LAC MG26-J1, volume 442, microfilm reel C-11051.

⁷⁵ Douglas-Home to Menzies, 28 January 1964, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 7.

⁷⁶ Grafftey-Smith to CRO, 14 March 1949, in TNA CAB 21/1821.

Upon arrival in London, prime ministers were faced with an array of social obligations. There was a long tradition of using fulsome catering to divert visiting ministers from scrutinising British proposals. In the age of Imperial Conferences, journalist Sidney Low joked that visiting ministers ‘should be sent over in pairs, one delegate to attend the meetings, and the other, a statesman of proved endurance, to go out to dinner’.⁷⁷ Before the 1911 Imperial Conference, Canadian Governor General Earl Grey suggested that officials in London should plan a gentle schedule for Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier as ‘his digestion is weak and the last conference nearly killed him’.⁷⁸ The biographer of Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin attributes Deakin’s decline in health to the 1907 Imperial Conference.⁷⁹ It was only food rationing that ensured hospitality at the early Prime Ministers’ Conferences was more subdued. In 1946 the Dominions Office restricted itself to two luncheon parties, a dinner party and a sherry party.⁸⁰ On top of these functions there were audiences with the royal family, and receptions organised by each high commission. Dining societies such as the Australia Club also expected a visit from their prime minister; addresses to such bodies were often the primary public speeches of the visit and were broadcast and carried in newspapers. Such a heavy load of events caused consternation for visiting officials. Frank Corner complained in 1946 that whereas Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley ‘had read all the documents carefully, eschewing the social engagements designed to prevent this’, New Zealand Prime Minister Walter Nash ‘was so much occupied delivering lofty visions at gatherings of the elderly and worthy that he had no time to read the documents’.⁸¹ The eclectic pastimes pursued by visiting prime ministers included

⁷⁷ Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, p. 228.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography* (Melbourne, 1979), p. 514.

⁸⁰ ‘Notes on Administrative Arrangements’, TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁸¹ Frank Corner in Malcolm Templeton (ed.), *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice: 50 Years in New Zealand’s External Relations 1943-93* (Wellington, 1993), p. 108.

Masonic meetings, fox hunts and reading James Bond novels.⁸² Appointment diaries were often filled with trivia. Holland's ministerial statement to the New Zealand Parliament in 1956 illustrates how side-meetings predominated:

to give members some indication of the type of life one leads at conferences such as the one I attended, I can say that in London I discussed Australian motor car exports to New Zealand ... I had the opportunity to discuss the Argentinean meat situation as it affects New Zealand ... Personally, I gained a great deal of interest in my study of the methods employed in the training of police dogs, and I saw the four of them which we secured being shipped to this country.⁸³

Supervising dog exports hardly seems the best use of prime ministerial time. Moreover, all these activities were additional to the official hospitality organised by the British government, undercutting accusations that the hectic schedule was a deliberate plot to distract visiting leaders.

The myriad of fringe issues was less of a diversionary tactic and more of a reflection of the multitude of British connections most leaders had. The Conferences differed from a foreign summit partly because so many leaders were educated in Britain. The collegial feel was natural given that many prime ministers had been at college together. Solomon Bandaranaike was Anthony Eden's contemporary at Christ Church. Eden predicted at the time that Bandaranaike would become Ceylonese Prime Minister.⁸⁴ Bandaranaike's two immediate predecessors John Kotelawala and Dudley Senanayake were Cantabrians. Two early Pakistani Prime Ministers were Oxonians: Liaquat Ali Khan at Exeter College and H.S. Suhrawardy at St Catherine's.⁸⁵ Pearson, a Rhodes Scholar, recalled that he shared a tutor at St. John's with British Foreign Secretary

⁸² McIntosh to Keith Holyoake, 18 January 1965, Papers of Sir John Ross Marshall, NLNZ MS-1403-155/3; Denis Blundell to White, 5 December 1968, Papers of Sir Keith Jacka Holyoake, NLNZ MS-1814-509/3; Williams diary, 8 July 1964, Eric Williams Memorial Collection (EWMC), MS 602.

⁸³ Parliament of New Zealand, *Hansard*, 9 August 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

⁸⁴ 'One of the family: Ceylon's Prime Minister', *The Observer*, 24 June 1956.

⁸⁵ Ivor Jennings, *Party Politics, Volume 3: The Stuff of Politics* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 272; Arjun Guneratne and Anita M. Weiss (eds) *Pathways to Power: The Domestic Politics of South Asia*, (New Delhi, 2014), p. 238; Muhammad Raza Kazmi, *Liaquat Ali Khan: His Life and Work* (Karachi, 2003), p. 8; Suranjan Das, 'Suhrawardy, Huseyn Shaheed (1892–1963)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2010).

Michael Stewart.⁸⁶ The formative experiences leaders had in Britain were not restricted to Oxbridge. Pakistani President Ayub Khan was moulded by another elite institution: Sandhurst.⁸⁷ Hastings Banda studied medicine at Edinburgh and emerged as a Church of Scotland elder as well as a doctor.⁸⁸ The educational experience which many shared had a meaningful impact on the development of the Commonwealth. It weakened claims that dependencies lacked sufficiently educated leaders to transfer power to. Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister Roy Welensky argued that decades of training programmes would be required before African majority rule, yet even he did not meet the educational test that formed part of the franchise, instead qualifying as a landholder.⁸⁹ Britain used the educational connections visitors had to emphasise the notion they were moderates schooled in British norms. Churchill cancelled a session of the 1953 Conference so that Nehru could accept an honorary degree from Cambridge. During the 1960 Conference Nehru made a triumphal return to Harrow, his former school.⁹⁰ While an honorary degree was not enough to satisfy Eric Williams – an alumnus of St. Catherine’s Oxford whose greatest disappointment in life was not being awarded an All Souls Examination Fellowship – goodwill was obtained by organising a ten day tour of British universities for him after the 1965 Conference.⁹¹ Williams was Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, which he interpreted as a substantive position rather than a ceremonial one. In 1950 eighty-nine members of the Cambridge Senate nominated Nehru for the university Chancellorship. He reluctantly declined on the advice of Indian officials, who presumably felt it would be a slight on Indian universities.⁹² Instead the role was accepted by former South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts. As the Chancellorship is not in the gift of the government,

⁸⁶ ‘Press briefing by the Prime Minister’, 20 June 1965, ‘Prime Ministers’ Conference June 1965 Press Conferences’, LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, R5276-62-X-E.

⁸⁷ Ian Talbot, ‘Ayub Khan, Mohammad (1907–1974)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁸⁸ John McCracken, ‘Banda, Hastings Kamuzu (c.1898–1997)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁸⁹ Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 365.

⁹⁰ Liesching to Norman Robertson, 20 May 1953, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Minister’s Meeting - 1953 (June) - Vol. 1 – Top Secret and Personal’, LAC MG26-L, volume 85, file C-10-21.

⁹¹ Colin Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, 2006), p. 165; *ibid.*, p.37.

⁹² Y.D. Gundevia, *Outside the Archives* (Hyderabad, 1984), p. 155.

the offer of it to two Commonwealth statesmen indicates the way in which they were familiar figures in Britain.

Throughout the Conferences prime ministers were treated as locals rather than interlopers. In contrast with state visits, where carriage processions and military inspections were laid on, there were few displays of pageantry. There was no ceremony at the airport. By 1964 it was decided that 'we regard the journey as coming to an end ... in the centre of London' to save sending ministers out to Heathrow at all.⁹³ Flags were not flown until 1957, when temporary flagpoles were constructed outside Downing Street.⁹⁴ Instead of diplomatic display, the rituals visiting leaders experienced resulted from integrating them into the full panoply of guilds and clubs. Foremost was being made an Honorary Freeman of the City of London. In 1957 Nehru and Nash were recognised in a dual ceremony, with Nehru given precedence.⁹⁵ Canadian Prime Minister Louis St Laurent accepted in 1955, but only after persuading City officials to drop the parade and horse-drawn coach in favour of an ordinary car, assuring them that Canadians would not be offended by such simplicity.⁹⁶ The frequency with which prime ministers were honoured made the ceremony at Mansion House almost a routine part of the Conferences. This was advantageous for the British Government, who could incorporate it into the schedule as a social highlight, without having to account for the expense or the order in which leaders were honoured. The elaborate spectacle was a small recompense for the large sterling balances Commonwealth countries held in the City. It is telling that Chifley, who attempted to nationalise banking in Australia, was one of the few leaders to refuse the honour, stating it was too much 'rigmarole'.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the City remained a reliable source of hospitality. During

⁹³ Garner to MacDonald, 13 May 1964, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/147, LONB 65/3/1/A.

⁹⁴ *New York Times*, 27 June 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁹⁵ 'Volume 5 - Invitations', '1955-57 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences', LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

⁹⁶ Canadian High Commission, London, to Department of External Affairs, 21 January 1955, '1955-57 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences', LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

⁹⁷ L.F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley* (Melbourne, 1961), p. 278.

preparations for the 1969 Conference, Nicholas Barrington in the Commonwealth Office wrote:

The Commonwealth Secretary reluctantly concluded that, on grounds of expense we could not justify the proposed gala performance at Covent Garden, but the Lord Mayor's Remembrancer has since asked if it would be appropriate for the corporation to offer lunch or dinner ... This would provide an occasion of great pomp and ceremony, at no cost to the exchequer.⁹⁸

The emphasis on getting pomp on the cheap is clear, and the abandoned plan for a Commonwealth gala is notable: while the early Conferences had eschewed public display, by 1969 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was vainly recommending a gala concert be held to raise the Commonwealth's profile.

In contrast with the difficulties Conference organisers of the late 1960s had in finding a public manifestation of Commonwealth unity, officials in earlier decades had a remarkable degree of success in incorporating visitors into essentially British rituals. In 1951 a 'Service of Intercession attended by Their Majesties the King and Queen on the occasion of the Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers' was held in Westminster Abbey.⁹⁹ Not to be confused with the Commonwealth Day Observance – a multi-faith service held since the 1970s and largely populated by school children – the 1951 service was strictly private, with fewer than 100 people attending.¹⁰⁰ Nor was it an ecumenical event: it was based firmly in Church of England ritual. The *Weekly Overseas Mail* described it thusly: 'the King and Queen knelt in prayer with six of the delegates and sought divine guidance on the road to peace'.¹⁰¹ Referring to six delegates was a circumspect way of referring to the six Christian prime ministers; although managing to get Malan, a Dutch Reformed Church minister, to participate was a considerable achievement. The hymns were unapologetically Anglican, with words such as 'Lord, while for all mankind we pray,

⁹⁸ Nicholas Barrington to Arthur Michael Palliser, 11 November 1968, TNA CAB 164/413.

⁹⁹ 'Overseas Visits: Press Cuttings 1952-57: Miscellaneous', Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, box 338.

¹⁰⁰ 'Empire Premiers at Vital Peace Talks', *Weekly Overseas Mail* (London), 13 January 1951, Papers of Sir Sidney George Holland, NLNZ MSY-1032.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

of every clime and coast, O hear us for our native land, the land we love the most'.¹⁰² Another notable ceremony was the Victoria Cross centenary parade during the 1957 Conference. All living recipients were invited to march down The Mall. Joining the Queen on the royal dais were Holland, Menzies, Nehru, St Laurent and Lord Malvern, Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.¹⁰³ Nehru's participation was startling given that many of the first awards were for suppressing the Indian Mutiny in 1857. Perhaps Britain's hospitality in paying for the travel of Indian recipients was appreciated, or he hoped his presence would act as a reminder that the military might of Empire had depended on the vast manpower of India. In any case, securing prime ministerial involvement was an accomplishment for Britain, lending the Commonwealth an appearance of greater cohesion. Given that all meetings were conducted in private, the ceremonial elements had a disproportionate impact on public perception of the Conferences.

Britain was adept in timing Conferences to align with milestones which were broad-based enough to be acceptable to visitors. For instance during the 1965 Conference the 700th anniversary of De Montfort's Parliament was marked in Westminster Hall with a loyal address.¹⁰⁴ All Commonwealth countries professed to share a parliamentary tradition, even if they did not all practice it, and 700 years was a sufficient passage of time for leaders to accept the anniversary as a symbol of democracy rather than a purely English landmark. However, Commonwealth countries were less accommodating of attempts to add a multilateral gloss to long-standing domestic events. A proposal to give the 1960 Lord Mayor's Show a Commonwealth theme met with an 'unexpectedly strong' reaction from Australia and Canada, prompting the CRO to note that 'sensitiveness is by no means limited to new Commonwealth

¹⁰² 'Overseas Visits: Press Cuttings 1952-57: Miscellaneous', Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, box 338.

¹⁰³ 'Volume 5 - Invitations', '1955-57 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences', LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

¹⁰⁴ Arnold Smith, briefing, 22 June 1965, 'Prime Ministers' Conference June 1965 Press Conferences', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, R5276-62-X-E.

governments'. The CRO detected 'antipathy to anything resembling an old style imperial pageant or depicting London as the hub of the Commonwealth', but it would be more accurate to say that Commonwealth governments objected to London being seen as a hub outside of the Conference period.¹⁰⁵ Thus a parade to honour a prime minister receiving the Freedom of the City of London was acceptable; whereas one held by the same Lord Mayor six months after the Conference was not. This reinforces the extent to which Commonwealth relations were conducted personally by prime ministers. They were happy for London to appear as a Commonwealth capital when they were gathered together, but were hesitant to set up any structure which would make London the capital year-round, such as a Commonwealth Secretariat.

Similarly, there was a concerted attempt to give the monarchy a Commonwealth character. The triune role of the sovereign as Head of the Commonwealth, resident British monarch and absentee monarch of numerous other realms was not an easy notion to communicate. At the 1957 Conference Holland was told of an incident during the state visit to Britain of Soviet President Khrushchev and foreign minister Bulganin the previous month:

They were warned ... that they should bear in mind that the Queen was not only Queen of the United Kingdom but also of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This surprised Bulganin and Khrushchev greatly. They said they didn't know there was any difference in the Queen's position as between India and Canada as both were republics. Bulganin and Khrushchev were noticeably affected by this fact.¹⁰⁶

The inability of world leaders to comprehend the monarch's position might have derived from the scrupulous efforts to avoid differentiating between Commonwealth realms and republics. During the Conferences all prime ministers had an audience with the monarch and received the same invitations. Some of the old Commonwealth delegations felt that such equality of

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum, 6 April 1960, TNA DO 35/9694.

¹⁰⁶ Holland to Holyoake, 24 June 1956, Holyoake Papers, NLNZ MSY-1814-283/5.

treatment unduly favoured the new Commonwealth. When attending the 1962 Conference, Australian Treasurer and future Prime Minister Harold Holt wrote:

It interested me to see the full regal squad working smoothly together as a team putting at ease some of the newer members of the Commonwealth family. When we found next day that Dame Pattie [Menzies] had also missed out on subsequent contact with the Queen and Philip, I commented that, to rate an encounter that evening, one either had to be 'very dark' or 'very difficult'.¹⁰⁷

More problematic than the degrees of difference between realms and republics was the danger the Conferences could appear to exist for the sake of royal celebration rather than political discussion. Attempts were made to hold a Conference in 1947 at the time of Princess Elizabeth's wedding, failing only because not all prime ministers were able to attend the nuptials.¹⁰⁸ The 1953 Conference was convened to coincide with the Coronation, and was almost entirely overshadowed by it. Instead of distributing briefs on the international issues of the day, voluminous correspondence was exchanged over the relative positions of prime ministers in the carriage procession. Southern Rhodesia presented particular problems as its Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins attended the Conferences even though Southern Rhodesia was not independent; it was decided that he would be treated as the equivalent of the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.¹⁰⁹ Malta lobbied intensely to be represented at both the Coronation and the Conference. The Colonial Office warned of 'disorder and conceivably bloodshed' if Malta was excluded.¹¹⁰ Maltese Prime Minister Giorgio Borg Olivier threatened to visit the Pope instead.¹¹¹ Organisers relented and allowed him to attend the Coronation, but not the Conference. The 1960 Conference was timed to suit an occasion which did not even centre on the Head of the Commonwealth: Princess Margaret's wedding. Perhaps it was apt that rancorous debates amongst the prime ministers, who went close to asking South Africa to leave the 'family' in 1960, occurred with the backdrop of a fraught 'family' wedding. Remarkably, the

¹⁰⁷ Travel letter, 13 September 1962, Papers of Harold Holt, National Archives of Australia (NAA) M2608 18.

¹⁰⁸ 'Disclaimer to the press by United Kingdom', 13 October 1947, ANZ ACIE 8798 EA1/73, 153/25/1.

¹⁰⁹ Churchill to Oliver, 19 May 1953, TNA DO 35/5034.

¹¹⁰ H. Hopkinson to Churchill, 17 May 1953, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Malta, Governor's Deputy to Martin, Colonial Office, 3 May 1953, *ibid.*

use of Conferences to mark royal events continued into the CHOGM era. The only Conference held in London since 1969 was in 1977 to mark the Queen's silver jubilee, despite fears that the meeting 'might be seen like an old-style durbar'.¹¹²

Given that the very notion of a 'Head of the Commonwealth' was an exercise in constitutional creativity, it was unsurprising that sometimes confusion reigned. In 1957, civil servants were still seeking clarification as to whether prime ministers attending Conferences had to be Privy Counsellors.¹¹³ This should have been self-evident after India became a republic, but confusion was understandable given precedents such as the Privy Council meeting during the 1951 Conference – attended by six prime ministers – at which Senanayake from the new Commonwealth and Holland from the old were sworn in.¹¹⁴ The confusion also reflected the fascination which royal distinctions held even for new Commonwealth leaders. Nkrumah was particularly keen to become a 'Right Honourable'. The honour, which requires an oath of loyalty to the monarch, was granted to Nkrumah in 1959, perhaps to delay his plan to adopt an executive presidency.¹¹⁵ It was also a subtle endorsement of black majority leadership which would not go unnoticed. As Governor-General of Ghana Lord Listowel wrote in his note of congratulations to Nkrumah: 'I can just imagine Welensky's face when he hears the news!'.¹¹⁶ The custom of the Queen dispensing honours to visiting prime ministers did not cease even during the turbulent 1960s. Eric Williams was made a Companion of Honour (CH) during the 1969 Conference, while Trudeau became one as late as 1984.¹¹⁷ The Companion of Honour may have seemed apt, given that it was non-titular and the first recipient was Smuts. Yet it was still an imperial honour, ultimately awarded on the advice of British ministers. The weight given

¹¹² Arnold Smith and Clyde Sanger, *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (London, 1983), p. 274, in Phillip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2014), p. 133.

¹¹³ H.L.M. Oxley to Chadwick 8 February 1957, TNA DO 35/8112.

¹¹⁴ Harvey, *Consultation and Cooperation in the Commonwealth*, p. 117.

¹¹⁵ Conversation between Home and Nkrumah, 10 August 1959, TNA DO 35/8112.

¹¹⁶ Listowel to Nkrumah, 8 August 1959, PRAAD RG/17/1/62.

¹¹⁷ André Deutsch to Williams, 18 June 1969, EWMC MS 84.

to honours is illustrated by the fact a shared Commonwealth order was one of the devices mooted in 1949 to preserve India's Commonwealth membership. Menzies revived the idea in 1954, proposing an 'Order of the Companions of the Commonwealth' and musing that 'perhaps even Nehru would accept it'. He also speculated 'whether the Queen's personal staff would not gain if it were an integrated Commonwealth staff'. Menzies was seeking to pre-empt republicanism, asserting that if a 'good type Pakistani officer' was posted to Buckingham Palace 'they could not very well be taken off the staff' if Pakistan became a republic, for 'it would still be reasonable for the Commonwealth country to maintain its representative on the personal staff of the Head of the Commonwealth'.¹¹⁸ Such proposals appear antiquated but were more logical than a status quo whereby the Commonwealth's ceremonial Head awarded only imperial honours and was served almost exclusively by British staff.

In spite of these contradictions, the monarch's role in the Prime Ministers' Conferences was not circumscribed by British ministerial advice. It was only once they were re-styled CHOGM in 1971 that British Prime Minister Ted Heath advised the Queen not to attend, despite her Private Secretary stating that it was 'the Queen's considered opinion that when there is a meeting of this nature it is desirable and indeed, it is her duty as Head of the Commonwealth to be present'.¹¹⁹ Royal interaction with the Conference could be remarkably informal. Nkrumah recalled that at the end of his audience with the Queen during the 1957 Conference: "The Queen asked me if I had lost something, and I said: "Yes, my stick." And can you imagine what she did? She actually got down on her knees to help me find it".¹²⁰ King George VI even did sick calls. Bruce Hutchinson described the King's visit to Mackenzie King, who was bed-bound during the 1948 Conference:

¹¹⁸ Memo for the Prime Minister, 9 November 1954, NAA A1209 957/5449.

¹¹⁹ Adene to Heath, 20 October 1970, TNA PREM 15/627, in Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2014), p. 130.

¹²⁰ Powell, *Private Secretary*, p. 116.

One day a quiet man in bowler hat walked through the hotel lobby and entered the invalid's room. The King of Canada had come to call on his Prime Minister. As they sipped tea together they must have suspected that it would be their last meeting – a melancholy occasion for both. In the official relationship of the last ten years a shy and curious sort of friendship had grown up between them.¹²¹

The relationship leaders built with royalty during the Conferences did impact decision-making. At the time of UDI, Ghana broke off diplomatic relations with Britain but did not leave Commonwealth because Nkrumah felt 'it would be too bad for that young girl if we left'. When asked which young girl he meant, he responded: 'The Queen'.¹²²

In addition to royalty, almost every bastion of the establishment was deployed for the Conferences. London's clubs opened their doors, albeit in a rule-bound way. Menzies was President of Melbourne's Savage Club and was welcomed as a 'brother Savage' in London. The Savage also extended honorary life membership to New Zealand Prime Minister Keith Holyoake.¹²³ However, London's older clubs were parsimonious. The honorary membership of White's Club given to St Laurent lasted just fifteen days, and came with the reservation that 'temporary members ... shall not be entitled to introduce guests into the club or play in club championship tournaments', as if visiting prime ministers were going to be used to bolster squash teams.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, archival records in new Commonwealth countries are not comprehensive enough to determine whether White's extended honorary membership to non-whites, but it seems unlikely. Other prime ministers preferred opera houses to club houses: Eric Williams went to Covent Garden twice in a week during the 1969 Conference.¹²⁵ Appointment diaries were particularly full when Conferences were held during the London season. Menzies' 1953 diary reads like the Bystander pages of *Tatler*: '31st May Lord Salisbury's garden party, 5th

¹²¹ Bruce Hutchison, *The Incredible Canadian: A Candid Portrait of Mackenzie King* (Don Mills, 2011), p. 440.

¹²² Powell, *Private Secretary*, p. 115.

¹²³ 'Notes Re Savage Club London', 21 January 1952, Holland Papers, NLNZ MS-1624-103/4.

¹²⁴ White's Club to St. Laurent, 2 January 1951, 'Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - Jan. 1951 - Vol. 2 - Unofficial', LAC MG26-L, volume 84, file C-10-14.

¹²⁵ Williams, 1969 diary, in EWMC MS 611.

June Archbishop of Canterbury's garden party. 7th June Duchess of Marlborough's garden party. 8th June gala performance Royal Opera House'.¹²⁶ In other years the diary read like the pages of *Wisden*. Menzies was wary of attending the 1962 Conference due to his one seat majority, but was persuaded by the 'possibilities of my personal attendance to my presidential duties': Menzies had been elected 'twelfth man' of the Lords Taverners in succession to the Duke of Edinburgh.¹²⁷ The appeal of a social cricket match seemed to outweigh the danger of his government falling on the floor of Parliament. Sometimes the Conference calendar seemed to be moulded around test cricket. Indian Deputy High Commissioner Yezdeard Gundevia recalled that Nehru declared one morning: 'I have got so much time on my hands today. What would you like me to do? I suggested his going to the oval to see the Test match ... nothing could have endeared him to the CRO more than this. In half an hour, we were sent six tickets for The Oval'.¹²⁸

The fact that Nehru, a workaholic, had a free day was significant. It would be easy to assume that it was a simpler age for politicians, before the rise of twenty-four hour news. Macmillan famously found time for an afternoon reading Jane Austen during the Suez crisis.¹²⁹ At face value, the typical schedule of a morning session starting at 11.00am followed by an afternoon session at 3.30pm does not seem too onerous. However, the spacing was deliberate, leaving ample time for lobbying. The succession of working lunches and courtesy calls reflected the breadth of British business interests. The Confederation of British Industry always invited leaders to lunch, and a repast with Lord Waverley on the Port of London yacht was an unofficial fixture.¹³⁰ Equally, the Conferences allowed leaders to promote their countries in the de facto

¹²⁶ 'Prime Minister's Engagements', NAA A1209 1958/5126.

¹²⁷ Menzies to Harrison, 15 January 1962, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 1, folder 122.

¹²⁸ Gundevia, *Outside the Archives*, p. 174.

¹²⁹ Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee, "'Staying in the game": Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role', in Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds), *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 150.

¹³⁰ Trevor Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman: Abubakar from the Black Rock* (London, 1991), p. 500; 'Volume 5 - Invitations', 'Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - 1956', LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

Commonwealth capital. In 1962 Holyoake cut the ribbon at Empire Dairies new packing plant, whose Anchor brand butter once sported the slogan 'British made in New Zealand'.¹³¹ The length of the Conferences – lasting on average ten days – ensured leaders spent more time visiting Britain than any other country. Over the twenty-five years covered by this thesis, 182 days – almost half a year – was spent in Conference. The only rival was the UN General Assembly each September, but it was more commonly the domain of foreign ministers and permanent representatives. Even nations with close economic ties, such as Australia and New Zealand, or Canada and the United States, did not hold such lengthy meetings at such a high level so frequently. Nor could foreign powers such as Israel and the Soviet Union, which were making large investments in the new Commonwealth, hope for anything like the same frequency of meetings. Yet new Commonwealth leaders faced only muted criticism for spending weeks at a time as guests of the former imperial power. Partly this was because the nationalist credentials of most new Commonwealth leaders were beyond suspicion. Rather, it was old Commonwealth delegates who were accused of being 'duchessed'; that is, being susceptible to formal British hospitality.¹³² Pearson was fond of Chequers, the British Prime Minister's country residence: 'Chequers is one of the most romantic places I have ever been asked to. It is full of history as you know ... the mound outside the main dining room is the mound of Cymbeline, the old British king'. However, in a typically North American way, he criticised its lack of modern conveniences: 'they haven't any double beds ... and I like to roam around in bed'.¹³³ Nonetheless, there remained a palpable sense in which a visit to Britain could connect old Commonwealth leaders to the 'old country'.

¹³¹ Holyoake diary, 21 September, 1962, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/128, LONB 53/15/5B.

¹³² David Day, 'Bowling to duchess diplomacy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 2012.

¹³³ 'Press briefing by the Prime Minister', 20 June 1965, 'Prime Ministers' Conference June 1965 - Press Conferences', LAC MG31-E47, volume 6, file 4, R5276-62-X-E.

The length of the Conferences was also indicative of the large proportion of business each government continued to conduct in London. Conferences were typically the first appearance a new Commonwealth member made on the world stage. For instance, Eric Williams claimed that the need to attend the 1962 Conference determined his country's independence day: 'We are not free to fix the date for independence. The ... Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference fixes the date'.¹³⁴ The continuity the model of 'independence within the Commonwealth' provided meant Williams' departure from Trinidad on a six week overseas tour only six days after independence occasioned little adverse comment in Trinidad and Tobago. This may have been because Trinidad and Tobago's opposition leader for much of the 1960s, Rudranath Capildeo, lived in Britain full-time as a lecturer at University College London.¹³⁵ Thus the Conferences provided a rare opportunity for the prime minister to consult with the leader of the opposition. While this was an extreme case, many governments continued to have large-scale operations in London. In a hangover from the Raj, India House controlled Government of India purchases for the entirety of Europe. In 1955 Deputy High Commissioner Gundevia observed that everything 'the new India was importing was purchased by the India Store Department'.¹³⁶ Moreover, ninety per cent of the thousand-strong staff at India House were permanent British residents.¹³⁷ A similar ratio applied in New Zealand House where Frank Corner observed the locally recruited staff 'resented the intrusion of New Zealanders' when senior ministers visited.¹³⁸ No such claims could be uttered publicly at Australia House, for unlike all other Australian overseas missions, until 1971 it was part of the Prime Minister's Department rather than the Department of External Affairs.¹³⁹ Thus meant

¹³⁴ *Trinidad Guardian*, 31 May 1962, in Selwyn Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man* (St Augustine, 2008), p. 310.

¹³⁵ 'Report by the Prime Minister on the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference to House of Representatives', July 23 1965, EWMC MS 747.

¹³⁶ Gundevia, *Outside the Archives*, p. 162.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³⁸ Corner in Templeton (ed.), *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice*, p. 94.

¹³⁹ Stuart Ward, 'Sir Alexander Downer and the embers of British Australia', in Carl Bridge, Frank Bongiorno and David Lee (eds), *The High Commissioners: Australia's Representatives in the United Kingdom, 1910-2010* (Canberra, 2010), p. 159.

that the Australian prime minister had the majority of his departmental staff in London rather than Canberra. Such was the scale of the Australian defence organisation in London that in 1950 Australian Defence Minister Eric Harrison was resident in London. When Menzies decided to move Harrison to the interior ministry, the Lord Chancellor administered the oath of office.¹⁴⁰ This example of a British minister swearing in an Australian minister, almost twenty years after the Statute of Westminster was formulated, epitomised the way London remained so vital for some Commonwealth members that the Conferences were almost a domestic affair.

Nevertheless, the Conferences were also an excuse for extensive travel. In transit from New Zealand for the 1951 Conference, Sidney Holland declared: 'I'm going to England to try to get the latest information on Korea'.¹⁴¹ The centrality of Britain appeared so self-evident that a meeting closer to the conflict was not contemplated. Yet it should not be assumed that leaders were oblivious to other countries, if only because propeller aircraft necessitated numerous stopovers on the voyage to London. Antipodean prime ministers usually followed the 'all-red route', taking on enough fuel at Darwin to make Singapore before reaching the subcontinent – often stopping in both India and Pakistan for political as much as operational reasons. Refuelling in the British-backed Trucial States would follow. Often Athens or Rome were the only truly foreign transit points. Similarly, African air routes were fixed along the lines of European colonialism, with South African leaders flying via Salisbury, Nairobi, Khartoum and Cairo. While these stops were fleeting, they nevertheless ensured prime ministers had some first-hand sense of other parts of the Commonwealth. Even trips to foreign countries had Commonwealth connotations. Menzies sometimes flew via the United States, but preferred to visit Washington on the way to London rather than the way back, to avoid the impression he was reporting on the Conference to the Americans. Similarly, when Eden invited Nehru to visit

¹⁴⁰ Menzies to Harrison, 23 October 1950, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 1, box 14, folder 119.

¹⁴¹ 'NZ leader's warning of "grave crisis"', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 28 December 1950.

London on his return from a visit to Moscow in 1955, Indian Ambassador to the Soviet Union K.P.S. Menon advised against it. He thought 'it would look as if Nehru was going to report at the headquarters of the Commonwealth'. Nehru rejected the advice and accepted Eden's invitation as 'he thought that this would give him an opportunity of communicating to the British government his estimate of the wholesale changes which had occurred in the USSR'.¹⁴² Yet while Commonwealth leaders went out of their way to visit London, British prime ministers rarely ventured around the Commonwealth. Churchill was a frequent transatlantic traveller, but his image of India was moulded by his time there in the Hussars in the 1890s. Eden's long apprenticeship as Foreign Secretary meant his experience was disproportionately outside the Commonwealth. Macmillan was the first serving prime minister to tour the Commonwealth, visiting India and the antipodes in 1958 and Africa in 1960.¹⁴³ While these visits were quasi-monarchical in their formality and tendency towards breadth rather than depth, they nonetheless had a major impact on Macmillan's views, culminating in his 'winds of change' speech, which indubitably had greater resonance for being delivered in Cape Town. Yet until 1966 a Prime Ministers' Conference away from London was not attempted – perhaps the geographic centre point of the Commonwealth was uncomfortably close to Suez?

Britain finally relinquished its role as perennial host in January 1966, with a Conference in Lagos in response to UDI. The Conference was not an unalloyed success, especially as the host, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was overthrown and assassinated less than a week after its conclusion. The Conference was convened in record time. Balewa issued invitations on 11 December 1965, the one month anniversary of UDI, and the Conference opened on 10 January 1966.¹⁴⁴ The initiative caught the Commonwealth by surprise. The Canadian High

¹⁴² K.P.S. Menon, *Many Worlds Revisited* (Bombay, 1981), p. 326.

¹⁴³ J.D.B. Miller, *Britain and the Old Dominions* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 207.

¹⁴⁴ Alhaji Yakubu Tali, Ghanaian High Commissioner to Nigeria, to M.F. Dei-Anang, African Affairs Secretariat, 28 December 1965, PRAAD RG 17/1/298.

Commissioner to Nigeria admitted there would be a delay in Pearson's reply as he was on a Caribbean cruise.¹⁴⁵ Menzies took a hard line, writing to Wilson that 'It seems almost fantastic that a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference should take place at a time when two Commonwealth countries have severed diplomatic relations with the central nation, Britain, when Pakistan has severed diplomatic relations with Malaysia, and when you have been made the victim of a stupid and offensive walk-out by several Commonwealth countries at the UN'.¹⁴⁶ Wilson contended that attendance would strengthen the hand of the 'moderate Africans' led by Balewa, but Menzies retorted that the Conference would be dominated by African leaders advocating the use of force, who he described as knowing 'no more about the democratic practice of one man one vote as the man in the moon'. Menzies concluded that 'the atmosphere would be, both literally and metaphorically, overheated', and refused to send an Australian delegation.¹⁴⁷ Instead, the Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria was designated as an observer, a device hitherto unheard of at the Conferences. New Zealand and Pakistan, who also sent High Commissioners to Lagos, at least permitted them to participate as heads of delegation. Menzies' action was petulant given that the concept of accrediting observers was akin to the UN model he decried. However, as Menzies had decided to retire at the end of January 1966, tact had become unnecessary.

If it had been held for any reason other than Rhodesia, the first Prime Ministers' Conference outside London could have been fêted as a sign of the Commonwealth's maturity. In particular, the fact a country other than Britain called the meeting would have demonstrated the collegiality of the prime ministers. Future Commonwealth Relations Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker had looked forward to such an innovation: in 1956 he wrote 'No-one ... has the special right to call the prime ministers together. Any prime minister could take the initiative. In practice this has

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Menzies to Wilson, 24 December 1965, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, folder 3.

¹⁴⁷ Menzies to Wilson, 14 December 1965, *ibid.*

been left to the prime minister of the United Kingdom'.¹⁴⁸ Yet in the tense atmosphere after UDI, it was difficult to present Lagos as a Commonwealth milestone. A British refusal of an African leader's invitation would have exacerbated the situation and hence Wilson accepted Balewa's offer despite being 'not at all eager to go'.¹⁴⁹ As late as New Year's Eve 1965, Wilson sought a delay to the Conference, but Balewa responded that 'postponement now would be misinterpreted'.¹⁵⁰ Britain feared a sequence of 'emergency' Conferences. During the Lagos Conference Britain acquiesced to a second Conference in June 1966 to follow up on sanctions, but secured agreement that it would be held in London. Britain managed to delay the meeting until September 1966, and after that another Conference was not held until January 1969 – the longest gap between Conferences in the period 1944-1969. Despite the precedent of Lagos, it was still assumed that convening Conferences remained Britain's prerogative. In addition, the Commonwealth Secretariat founded in 1965 was supportive of London as the customary Conference venue. Inaugural Secretary-General, Canadian civil servant Arnold Smith dissuaded Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere from holding a meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers in Dar-es-Salaam before the 1969 Conference, and convinced him to come to London instead. Arnold Smith confided in British Minister without Portfolio George Thomson that this indicated that 'Nyerere was developing a new maturity'.¹⁵¹ Smith envisaged a primary role for London even once the Conferences began to be held elsewhere. In 1968 he stated 'it was probably preferable to have at least two of three or three out of four meetings in London'.¹⁵²

Therefore, the Lagos experiment did not have an immediate impact on the evolution of the Conferences. It did establish the custom of meeting in a modern convention centre – all visiting

¹⁴⁸ Patrick Gordon Walker, 'When the Prime Ministers Meet', *New Commonwealth*, 8 June 1956.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson to Menzies, 2 January 1966, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, folder 3.

¹⁵⁰ Balewa to Wilson, 31 December 1965, *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Record of a meeting between the Minister without Portfolio and His Excellency Mr. Arnold Smith, 19 November 1968, TNA CAB 164/101.

¹⁵² Palliser to Williams, 5 February 1968, *ibid.*

delegations stayed in the Federal Palace Hotel. Meeting and sleeping under one roof doubtlessly encouraged informal discussion and allowed delegates to make the most of the condensed Conference, which was three days long rather than the typical ten. Yet beyond these practical changes, the Lagos Conference did not diverge substantially from British norms. The January 1966 Conference was the first to be administered by the Commonwealth Secretariat, which was charged with circulating agenda items, taking minutes and briefing the press. Nigeria was responsible for issuing invitations, chairing the meetings, and providing security and hospitality. Thus no host country had the opportunity to control both the formal agenda and informal atmosphere in the way Britain had for decades. Yet Wilson still sought assurances before committing to attend. The CRO Permanent Under-Secretary flew to Lagos beforehand to discuss with the terms of the communiqué with Balewa.¹⁵³ It was hypocritical of Britain to send an envoy to secure undertakings, given it would have been unlikely to entertain such requests when it was host.

Thus, even though Lagos set a precedent for gathering outside London, Britain maintained its pattern of professing to welcome a meeting elsewhere but doing nothing to encourage it. Indeed, Britain actively opposed an offer from Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau to host the 1969 Conference. The British High Commission in Canada was instructed that 'Ottawa in winter may well not prove attractive to many prime ministers ... without breaching position that prime minister is ready to go along with whatever emerges as consensus, you should do whatever you can, if matter is raised by Canadians, to steer them in favour of London'.¹⁵⁴ This was despite Wilson earlier writing to Ceylonese Prime Minister Senanayake stating that he himself had suggested Ottawa.¹⁵⁵ The Commonwealth Secretariat sought out alternatives but only succeeded in provoking what Arnold Smith described as 'the Caribbean imbroglio':

¹⁵³ Wilson to Menzies, 2 January 1966, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, folder 3.

¹⁵⁴ D.P.R. Mackilligin to Palliser 27 June 1968, TNA CAB 164/101.

¹⁵⁵ Palliser to J.R. Williams 25 September 1968, TNA CAB 164/413.

‘Mr Barrow had offered Barbados and said he was ready to see a more senior prime minister as chairman. Mr Burnham supported this proposal but wanted the senior Caribbean prime minister (Dr Williams) in the chair. Mr Shearer had offered Kingston and was ready to give way to a more senior prime minister (but not Dr Williams)’.¹⁵⁶

Despite this rather comic episode, Smith still saw merit in the idea of having a Conference in a ‘small country with an experienced prime minister from one of the bigger countries in the chair’.¹⁵⁷ This suggests a failure to appreciate how the formal and informal aspects of the Conference worked in tandem – how the host country affected the course of proceedings by the hospitality it provided as much as its chairing of the meetings. Following the withdrawal of Trudeau’s offer, soundings showed a clear majority in favour of London, with fifteen favouring meeting there as opposed to three against.¹⁵⁸

Even though they would have been surprised at the number of new countries with places at the table, the 1969 Conference would have been instantly identifiable to the participants in the 1944 Conference. The social schedule was still dominated by royalty and familiar British institutions. The move away from London as recurrent host was less of a symbol of Commonwealth equality and more a consequence of Britain ceasing to derive sufficient benefits from hosting. After the 1969 Conference Wilson made a note for file recording that ‘he would gladly attend a meeting outside the United Kingdom provided that the local host would be a good chairman, the climate and accommodation were reasonably satisfactory and that security and communications were good’. Security was arguably the principal requirement, especially after assembling in Lagos on the eve of a coup. Security in London had always been discreet, typically consisting of a single special branch policeman for each prime minister. For Holyoake the main use of his detective inspector was to obtain a second opinion while suit shopping at Simpsons of Piccadilly.¹⁵⁹ The

¹⁵⁶ A.D. Brighty to Palliser, 25 April 1968, TNA CAB 164/101.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ ‘Circular for Commonwealth High Commissioners’, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Holyoake diary, 14 January 1969, ANZ AECO 18656, PM11/3.

relative threat level can be measured by the additional protection some prime ministers received. At the 1969 Conference the Home Office listed eight leaders as requiring ‘special arrangements’: Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania and Zambia. In the case of Nigeria, six officers were assigned.¹⁶⁰ Security was a recurring concern in the 1960s. Nkrumah received a death threat in an attempt to keep him away from the 1960 Conference.¹⁶¹ In 1964 a member of the British Fascist Party assaulted Kenyan Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta outside his hotel.¹⁶² Guards were pulled off ceremonial duties to provide an active around-the-clock presence at Marlborough House.¹⁶³ By 1969, protests during the Conference covered almost every cause imaginable. The *Evening News Reporter* cited placards reading ‘claim majority rule in Rhodesia’, ‘recognise Biafra’, ‘democracy must prevail in Zanzibar’, ‘Kashmir for the Kashmiris’ and ‘scrap Ayub’s bogus constitution’.¹⁶⁴ Separated from other protesters by a police cordon, pro-UDI demonstrators displayed a banner reading ‘support our British kinsmen in Rhodesia’, while a dozen buses filled with police were held in reserve at the rear of St James’s Palace.¹⁶⁵ On the final Sunday of the 1969 Conference five thousand people joined a protest organised by the Zimbabwe Solidarity Action Committee, Black People’s Alliance, and Save Biafra Committee. The march was mostly peaceful, but windows were broken at South Africa House and there were confrontations with around two hundred National Front members flying Union Flags.¹⁶⁶

Protests during the 1960s were obviously not confined to Commonwealth Conferences, nor did they cause significant stress to visiting delegations. Indeed, the British High Commissioner in Accra was told by Colonel Hassan of Ghana that ‘while the freedom allowed in London to demonstrators created certain security problems ... we were very wise to allow people to blow

¹⁶⁰ Phillip Allen, Home Office, to Burke Trend, Cabinet Office, 31 December 1968, TNA HO 325/142.

¹⁶¹ Snelling to Nkrumah, 19 April 1960, PRAAD RG 17/1/74.

¹⁶² ‘Man Attacks Kenyatta Outside Hotel’, *Trinidad Guardian*, 16 July 1964.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ ‘Chanting crowd meets Prime Ministers’ *Evening News Reporter*, TNA HO 325/142.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ “‘A” Department New Scotland Yard - Demonstration by Zimbabwe Solidarity Action Committee, Black People’s Alliance, and Save Biafra Committee on Sunday 12th January 1969’, *ibid.*

off steam in this manner. It also had the advantage of identifying one's opponents'.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the Conferences had moved from bolstering Britain's 'world role' to being a domestic political liability. Whereas the early Conferences had burnished public perceptions of an identifiably British Commonwealth, by 1969 the only ones waving the Union Flag were the National Front. After the demonstrations at the 1969 Conference, it was tightly-policed Singapore that was chosen as the venue for the 1971 CHOGM. While British prime ministers rarely seemed comfortable with long-haul travel – Ted Heath took his personal physician to Singapore – it was easier to manage the message for domestic audiences from abroad than when protesters were filling Trafalgar Square. British prime ministers lost their opportunity to shape the tone of the Conferences through parties at Chequers, but gained the ability to bide their time in discussions, rather than always having to speak first as chair. Moreover, much of the social structure remained even after Britain ceased to be host, including the receptions, dinners and audiences with the monarch. Having missed the 1971 CHOGM after reluctantly accepting Heath's ministerial advice, the Queen has attended every CHOGM except the 2013 edition in Sri Lanka. On that occasion the Prince of Wales attended on her behalf, where he declared: 'I think that what we are renewing here are those family ties, those family associations, and above all those family values'.¹⁶⁸ Therefore the notion of the Conference as a family gathering, however naïve, persisted well beyond the end of meeting in the 'mother country'. Hence this chapter challenges the established idea that the transition away from London signified Britain's acceptance of being one member among many. Rather, Britain relinquished its role as host on account of self-interest; the advantages of hosting were no longer satisfactory. Ceasing to serve as host did not preclude displays of British exceptionalism, particularly during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister. Given the continued popular appeal of London, Britain could have continued as host for some years after 1969, just as London is still the unchallenged

¹⁶⁷ J.B. Unwin, British High Commission, Accra, to C.E. Wool-Lewis, CRO, 6 August 1964, TNA DO 195/223.

¹⁶⁸ 'Charles hosts Commonwealth "family"', *Telegraph and Argus* (Bradford) 15 November 2013.

headquarters of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Instead Britain handed over the role of host largely on its own terms; preserving the model of private meetings without formal ballots, buttressed by a bevy of social events. The frequency of CHOGMs remained largely the same as the London Conferences at around every two years, without being locked in to a specific month of season. Despite the precedent of Lagos, single-issue emergency meetings did not become entrenched. Even at the height of debates over apartheid in the 1980s, CHOGMs dealt with a variety of topics. Therefore, London's role as home of the Prime Ministers' Conferences from 1944 to 1969 was strikingly successful as an exercise in British soft power; the social side of the gatherings preserved British pre-eminence and set the tone for a uniquely informal, 'clubbish' style of international gatherings, the atmosphere of which lingered into CHOGM in later decades.

Chapter Two:

The ‘fraternal association’:

The conduct of the Conferences 1944-1961

‘We still have an attachment to each other which none of us would deny ... this is why I can sit in a Prime Ministers’ Conference and feel instantly as much at home as if I were sitting in my own cabinet’¹

Menzies’ emphasis on sentiment in his 1960 Smuts Lecture was typical of a widespread tendency to resort to the ineffable to describe the Commonwealth. New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser described Commonwealth membership as ‘independence with something added’.² What that something was remained undefined, yet undeniable. The hesitancy to explicate the distinctiveness of Commonwealth relations was politically expedient; to state that leaders were united by the English language would have alienated French Canadians and Afrikaners, even before multilingual leaders from the new Commonwealth joined the chorus. Nor could it be contended that old Commonwealth leaders felt at home because of racial homogeneity. Since 1921, the Imperial Conferences had included a smattering of maharajas in the Indian delegation. Nor was it a commonality of class; even if Nehru and Churchill were both Old Harrovians, Chifley was equally proud of leaving school early and joining the railways as a cleaner. How then to explain the expressions of homeliness, even fraternity, which were sincerely made by Commonwealth leaders? This chapter contends that the Prime Ministers’ Conferences were structured to have a ‘clubbish’ atmosphere – ostensibly informal, but heavily circumscribed by precedent. The club epithet was not just the shorthand of journalists; Pearson told the Canadian House of Commons after the 1964 Conference that the Commonwealth was a ‘club, as it was

¹ Robert Menzies, *Smuts Memorial Lecture: The Changing Commonwealth* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 20.

² W.D. McIntyre, ‘Peter Fraser’s Commonwealth’ in A.D. McIntosh (ed.), *New Zealand in World Affairs: Volume 1* (Wellington, 1972), p. 39.

continually referred to in the discussion'.³ Such an environment was appealing to national leaders. There was the familiarity of Cabinet-style discussions, without the jostling for power inherent in managing a national cabinet. There were no portfolios to be allocated and no budget to be spent. With the monarch effectively acting as a patron and Britain serving as 'club secretary', there were not even honorifics to fight over. So long as the discussions remained private, leaders could enjoy speaking candidly to their peers while remaining confident that they could tailor the public message for their domestic audience. Therefore, of all the metaphors deployed to encapsulate the Commonwealth, the notion of a voluntary club – in Churchill's words, a 'fraternal association' – was the most effective.⁴ For almost two decades, it was mutually beneficial for leaders to participate in the Conferences and leave the 'club rules' largely unwritten and unchallenged. It was only when Britain sought in 1962 to apply for an additional club – the EEC – that the model began to break down. This chapter will examine the conduct of the Conferences from 1944 to 1961, arguing that through careful management of the scope of the agenda and subtle differentiation between different types of discussions, Britain as host nation managed to construct a Conference format that preserved British hegemony for longer than its economic and military resources may have otherwise permitted.

This chapter will be broadly chronological, emphasising how new members were incorporated into the gatherings and for the most part accepted the existing precepts. Change occurred largely by what Arthur Snelling described as 'admirable and efficient ad-hoc-ery', where one-off exceptions became unquestioned norms.⁵ The slow evolution of the Conferences by way of haphazard precedent rather than premeditated rupture paralleled the wider process of British decolonisation. Just as there was no definitive declaration of the end of Empire, there was no

³ Pearson, *House of Commons Debates*, 17 July 1964, twenty-sixth parliament, second session, volume 6, p. 5601.

⁴ *The Annual Register*, 1955, p. 74, in Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London 1969), p. 349.

⁵ Snelling to Ian Watt, 4 August 1959, DO 35/7870, in A.F. Madden (ed.), *The End of Empire: Dependencies since 1948* (London, 2000), p. 54.

public announcement that the Imperial Conferences had been rebadged as the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences. The 1944 Conference was described in Cabinet Office minutes as the 'Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers', but many leaders continued to unselfconsciously refer to the gatherings as Imperial Conferences for the duration of the 1940s, and as late as 1964 New Zealand was still filing its briefs under the heading 'Imperial Affairs'.⁶ The lack of consistency regarding the name of the Conferences was useful as it allowed countries to emphasise or deemphasise elements as they saw fit. It did however create difficulties in explicating the status of the Conferences in comparison to other international gatherings. In 1952, Heather Harvey observed that the term 'meetings' had been used in 1944, 1946, 1948, 1949 and 1951 and yet still concluded 'the title under which these meetings are known has not yet been formalised'.⁷ Nonetheless, the term 'Conference' became predominant; perhaps the alliteration was too appealing for headline writers. More likely, the use of conference over meeting became more common as it lent the Commonwealth greater connotations of gravitas once consensus became more difficult. A similar process occurred during in the 1970s and 1980s during debates over apartheid sanctions, when CHOGMs were often styled as Commonwealth 'summits'.

The alteration from Imperial Conferences to Prime Ministers' Conferences was lauded after the fact as a momentous, enlightened change.⁸ Such a rendering falsely imputes that the end of the Imperial Conferences was a premeditated transformation rather than a wartime expediency. The Imperial designation was dropped was to preserve Britain's power to act unilaterally, rather than to connote a more collaborative grouping. As the last chapter observed, an Imperial Conference

⁶ 'Imperial Affairs - Organisation - General - Meetings of High Commissioners in Commonwealth Capitals', ANZ ABHS 950 W4627/3662, PM 151/1/24.

⁷ Heather J. Harvey, *Consultation and Co-operation in the Commonwealth: A Handbook on Methods and Practice* (London, 1952), p. 114.

⁸ Shridath Ramphal, 'A Working Internationalism' in *The Commonwealth at the Summit: Communiqués of Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, 1944-1986* (London, 1987), p. 2.

during the Second World War would have intensified agitation for a revival of the Imperial War Cabinet. The example of the First World War suggested that an Imperial Conference could make some dominion prime ministers a semi-permanent presence in London. For instance, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes arrived for the Imperial War Cabinet in April 1918 and did not return to Australia until August 1919. Smuts, King, Curtin and Fraser were far less likely to linger in London, but their attendance at a lengthy Imperial Conference would have made it difficult for Britain to resist demands for permanent dominion representation in the War Cabinet. The solution was to call the 1944 gathering a Prime Ministers' Meeting, which gratified Mackenzie King's dislike of imperial appellations and had the additional benefit of discouraging dominion prime ministers from sending deputies.

An additional consideration during wartime was that Imperial Conferences, which had often been held in parallel with jubilees or Coronations, had connotations of celebration, even excess: J.D.B. Miller wrote of the 'glitter' Imperial Conferences had.⁹ Even after 1944, newspapers speculated when the next 'full dress' Imperial Conference would be, as if the Prime Ministers' Conferences were a wartime interregnum sustained only by the aversion of Labour politicians for formal dress.¹⁰ It could indeed be the case that Labour rule in Britain, Australia and New Zealand after the War precluded a reversion to pre-War formality – Chifley told the British High Commissioner to Australia that 'I would ask to be excused from functions requiring dinner suits as I have never possessed one' – but it is rather more likely that the Imperial Conference was abandoned because it served a fundamentally different purpose.¹¹ The Imperial Conferences originated as Colonial Conferences, initially populated largely by Australian and South African provincial premiers. They served to inflate the status of visiting delegations, giving a taste of diplomacy to those which were yet to receive full responsibility for external

⁹ J.D.B. Miller, *Britain and the Old Dominions* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 156.

¹⁰ 'No full imperial conference', *Singapore Free Press*, 15 October 1947, p. 1.

¹¹ L.F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley* (Melbourne, 1961), p. 278.

affairs. This helps explain the participation of India in Imperial Conferences from 1921, Southern Rhodesia from 1932 and Burma in 1937. Conversely, the Irish Free State could demonstrate the minimalism of its 'external association' with the Commonwealth by declining to participate in Imperial Conferences after 1932. This made a public point without threatening bilateral ties. In this sense, it was in Irish interests for Imperial Conferences to be conducted on an elaborate scale, as it gave them more to repudiate. Equally, the grandeur of the Imperial Conferences proved useful to British officials after 1944, who could characterise them as stilted affairs stuffed with morning-suited minor ministers, in counterpoint to the more businesslike Prime Ministers' Conferences. Recalling the 1937 Imperial Conference, Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook stated, slightly disdainfully, that the 'whole proceedings had something of the atmosphere of an international conference'.¹² Yet this was the intention at the time. The 1937 Conference was held in St James's Palace, a location synonymous with courtly diplomacy. Delegations were substantial and hierarchical, with prime ministers accompanied by a retinue of junior ministers. For instance in 1930 the British delegation was fifty strong, including eight ministers, and even the less enthusiastic South Africans had three ministers in their team of seventeen.¹³ The large-scale ensured that whole generations of ministers and officials were schooled in British methods. Even at Prime Ministers' Conferences during the 1960s, Menzies would cite resolutions from the minutes of the 1937 Imperial Conference, in which he participated as Australian Attorney-General.¹⁴

Imbuing the Imperial Conferences with many of the airs of foreign diplomacy made them a useful training ground for the participation of the dominions in international affairs. Miller argued that Australia and Canada were influential in the early development of the United

¹² Andrestinos N. Papadopoulos, *Multilateral Diplomacy within the Commonwealth* (The Hague, 1982), p. 42.

¹³ H. Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (New York, 1971), p. 693.

¹⁴ 'Australia's Immigration Policy', CRO brief, June 1964, TNA LAB 8/2990.

Nations because of the lessons learned from their ‘fumbling at the League of Nations’.¹⁵ Similarly, the decades spent rebuffing proposals at Imperial Conferences for a common Empire foreign policy schooled the dominions to be effective voices for middle powers in the post-War world. The formality of the Imperial Conferences seems excessive in hindsight, but it had demonstrated that the dominions were independent actors in international affairs. While the ceremonious appearance of the plenary sessions at St. James’ Palace signalled to foreign states that the dominions were being treated as independent states rather than as simple colonials. The private nature of the Conferences ensured that if there was any naivety or incomprehension on the part of dominion delegates, it was not visible to foreign states. The sequence of Imperial Conferences between the Wars, especially the 1926 edition which produced the Balfour Declaration and the 1930 edition which drafted the Statute of Westminster made it clear that the Empire was not a unitary state. It is ironic then that the agenda of the first Prime Ministers’ Conference included one of the final attempts by Britain to be the sole representative of the Empire on the world stage.

The Second World War was distinctive in that the major meetings which determined the post-War structure occurred before the end of hostilities. The Prime Ministers’ Conference in May 1944 fits this pattern, concluding three weeks before D-Day and nearly a year before the San Francisco Conference which created the UN charter. Discussions on the potential post-War global order had hitherto been largely confined to the ‘Big 3’ through summits in Cairo, Tehran and Moscow. Churchill expected this emphasis on the great powers to carry through into the post-War organisation. Frank Corner of the New Zealand Ministry of External Affairs recorded that Churchill proposed to the 1944 Prime Ministers’ Conference that ‘the great powers would be the instruments for carrying out enforcement action anywhere in the world as directed by an

¹⁵ Miller, *Britain and the Old Dominions*, p. 207.

International Security Agency'. This would be reinforced by the great powers holding 'sovereignty over key strategic bases throughout the world'.¹⁶ Smaller powers would participate primarily through regional organisations in Europe, Asia and the Americas. The 'Supreme World Council' would be limited to the United States, the Soviet Union, China and the United Kingdom, which would represent the 'British Empire and Commonwealth'.¹⁷ Churchill did not restrict himself to words in an effort to persuade dominion leaders. Corner recalled that:

At one break in the proceedings, Churchill strolled over to Fraser and without comment gave him a document ... It turned out to be a report on evidence recently discovered in a forest at Katyn of the murder of about twelve thousand officers, the elite of Poland's army ... What was Churchill saying to Fraser by producing this document? Was it: "please stop childish games over the organisation of the world's security and grow up?"¹⁸

Such wordlessness contrasted with the formal speechifying of the Imperial Conferences. On the other hand, discussion was still framed by lengthy British briefs. The 1944 Conference commenced with a two day review of the world situation given by Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden.¹⁹ Such a lengthy review from the Foreign Secretary undercut the pretence that Britain was giving the dominions equal status, given that they were discouraged from bringing their own external affairs ministers. In this respect, the Prime Ministers' Conferences were a retrograde step for the dominions, as now only Britain had a delegation on the scale of the Imperial Conferences.

The reduction in delegates gave Britain numerical superiority but it also increased the agency of dominion prime ministers, who did not have to worry about being contradicted by their ministers. Mackenzie King quickly identified that Churchill's plan for regional organisations with an overarching supreme council did not have the full support of Eden, who was inclined

¹⁶ Frank Corner in Malcolm Templeton (ed.), *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice: 50 Years in New Zealand's External Relations 1943-93* (Wellington, 1993), p. 89.

¹⁷ Kenneth W. Thompson, *Churchill's World View: Statesmanship and Power* (Baton Rouge, 1987), p. 301.

¹⁸ Corner in Templeton (ed.), *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice*, p. 90.

¹⁹ King to Colonel Ralston, 6 May 1944, 'King 1944: Massey-McLean', LAC MG26-J1, volume 366, microfilm reel C-7053.

towards a single world organisation. When the subject came up on the agenda, King observed ‘it looked for a while as if no one would wish to say anything. Churchill rather hesitated to begin discussion. Eden did not wish to open up particularly’.²⁰ James Eayrs argues that Churchill and Eden’s reluctance to speak was to avoid openly disagreeing with each other, enabling King to seize the initiative. King stated: ‘it would not be wise to encourage the peoples of the world to return to their illusions about their ability to live in continental isolation. I am glad to see, therefore, the views expressed in these [Foreign Office] papers that the world organisation should be established first’.²¹ It is notable that King records that he intervened by reading a prepared ‘statement from beginning to close’.²² As the Conferences grew by 1969 to include up to thirty leaders taking turns to speak, the meetings of the 1940s were nostalgically recalled as intimate affairs consisting entirely of free-form discussion. Menzies even tried to argue that the meetings had no formal agenda at all, and Prime Ministers simply discussed topics as they arose.²³ King’s recollection of reading a prepared statement, clearly drafted to anticipate an issue on the agenda, highlights that there was no golden age of uninterrupted spontaneous debate. King argued that his prepared rebuttal was decisive in challenging Churchill’s advocacy of a regional approach’.²⁴ Yet on other issues Churchill was able to bring dominion prime ministers around to his view, even when their external affairs departments had espoused different policies. Australia and New Zealand had been advocating for robust international supervision in the post-War trustee system, with colonial powers submitting reports to the new world organisation. Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley argued that any close supervision would undermine sovereignty, stating: ‘he did not regard the mandate system as wholly satisfactory ... Large-scale development was generally beyond the local resources of a colonial territory, and

²⁰ J.W. Pickersgill (ed.), *The Mackenzie King Record: Volume 1, 1939-1944*, p. 678-9, in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto, 1972), p. 141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141-2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²³ Terence MacDermot, to Department of External Affairs, 5 April 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, part 2, 50085-H-40.

²⁴ Eayrs, *Peacemaking and Deterrence*, p. 142.

without any guarantee of permanency of sovereignty, the parent Power was naturally reluctant to provide for large-scale expenditure from its own funds'.²⁵ Fraser continued to press for stronger supervision, but Curtin accepted Stanley's argument without conferring with the Australian Department of External Affairs. William Roger Louis observed that 'Curtin did not inform Evatt that a basic point in Australian policy had been reversed ... When Evatt again pressed for international accountability later in the year, Australian policy appeared to be totally inconsistent; but from Evatt's point of view there was no inconsistency at all.'²⁶ The emphasis on prime ministerial prerogative during the 1944 Conference secured firm decisions, but it did not ensure that these decisions were communicated to national governments.

The smaller size of the 1944 Conference strengthened the ability of dominion prime ministers to exploit conflicts within the British government and avoid dissenting voices in their own government. On the other hand, procedures which gave Britain pre-eminence were largely unchanged from the Imperial Conferences. The seating plan devised by the Cabinet Office had British ministers occupying one whole side of the cabinet table – indeed more than one side, as Indian Secretary Leo Amery was seated with Indian representatives the Maharaja of Kashmir and Firoz Khan Noon on the other side.²⁷ Their status illustrated how the change from the Imperial Conferences had been only partial. Britain had insisted that the dominion prime ministers attend unencumbered by a large retinue of ministers. Yet Amery was designated as leader of the Indian delegation, although by definition as a British minister he was subordinate to Churchill. At an Imperial Conference, the presence of a hereditary ruler such as the Maharaja of Kashmir to represent the princely states was not illogical, but at a Prime Ministers' Conference his position was anomalous. At least Firoz Khan Noon became Prime Minister of

²⁵ 'Tenth meeting, 9 May 1944', TNA CAB 99/28, in William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay 1941-1945: The United States and the decolonization of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1977), p. 345.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

²⁷ 'Points of Procedure', TNA CAB 21/851.

Pakistan from 1957 to 1958, but this could not have been anticipated at the time. Even if it was conceded that the importance of India made an exception necessary, it does not explain the presence of Godfrey Huggins of Southern Rhodesia. While he was styled as a prime minister, Britain retained formal control over Southern Rhodesia's foreign affairs and defence – fields which comprised the majority of the agenda. His participation suggests a continuation of the Imperial Conferences' role in providing a platform for self-governing colonies to compensate for their lack of diplomatic status. Even in this respect, the arrangements for the Prime Ministers' Conferences were unsatisfactory as Churchill excluded the Indian and Rhodesian delegations from two defence meetings, and they were not allowed to sign the communiqué.²⁸ Nonetheless, the Indian representatives were consulted on the communiqué and agreed with its contents.²⁹ Therefore, Conferences before the transfer of power in India cannot be painted exclusively as a 'white man's club', even if its non-white attendees were associate members at best.

The club metaphor was also inadequate for the 1944 Conference because so much of its structure was moulded to suit the chairman, rather than being decided by the 'club committee'. Churchill put back the starting times of the morning sessions to 11 a.m. for his convenience.³⁰ The minutes gave his opinions undue emphasis; Fraser complained to Eden that they 'reproduced and elaborated the arguments in favour of regional organisation ... I am at a loss to understand this'.³¹ Eden concurred and wrote to Churchill that 'I must say that I am inclined to share the view that the minutes ... do not represent very exactly the sense of that meeting'.³² Churchill also ignored the notes on procedure prepared by the Cabinet Office, which suggested that Mackenzie King, as senior Commonwealth prime minister, should take the chair when

²⁸ Edward Bridges to Churchill, 8 May 1944, *ibid.*

²⁹ David Monteath to Edward Bridges, 15 May 1944, TNA CAB 21/852.

³⁰ Edward Bridges to Churchill, 10 May 1944, TNA CAB 21/851.

³¹ Fraser to Eden, 18 May 1944, TNA CAB 21/854.

³² Eden to Churchill, 19 May 1944, *ibid.*

Churchill was absent.³³ Instead Churchill made Attlee chair when he was unable to attend. It was hardly a sign of equality to make the British Deputy Prime Minister chairman when statesmen with decades of experience such as King and Smuts were present. One of the sessions missed by Churchill included Curtin's proposal for an Empire Secretariat which had been in development for over a year. Curtin called for a small coordination unit to be established in London tasked with facilitating consultation between Britain and the dominions before decisions were made, rather than communicating by telegram after the fact. Curtin hoped that a permanent body with a multinational staff would be 'an agency for continuity', maintaining collaboration in between Conferences.³⁴ Having a collective organisation 'responsible for seeing to the preparation and presentation of information' at Conferences may well have led to greater consensus between members, as well as creating a genuinely multilateral body over twenty years before the Commonwealth Secretariat was established.³⁵ Yet having Churchill's absence during Curtin's presentation denied the plan any chance of gaining traction. Churchill and Smuts were instead at a military planning meeting for D-Day, epitomising the selectivity in dominion consultation which Curtin was trying to overcome.³⁶ In contrast with Curtin's innovative scheme, British proposals for enhanced liaison were predictable. King complained that regarding defence cooperation Dominions Secretary Lord Cranborne presented 'a long paper putting forth different suggestions as to policies ... everything that they had been trying for years was jammed into this statement'. In his diaries King irritably described it as 'a bit of underhand work. It really amounted to high pressure of the worst kind in trying to shove this kind of thing through'.³⁷

³³ 'Points of Procedure', TNA CAB 21/851.

³⁴ Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, p. 168, in James Curran, 'An Organic Part of the Whole Structure': John Curtin's Empire', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37:1 (March 2009) p. 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Hankey diary entry, 25 May 1944, in Roskill, *Hankey, Volume 3*, p. 592, in Curran, 'An Organic Part of the Whole Structure', p. 69.

³⁷ Pickersgill (ed.), *Mackenzie King Record*, p. 687, in Eayrs, *Peacemaking and Deterrence*, p. 207.

King's fear that Britain was attempting to 'shove' proposals through the Conference was valid – in addition to Britain's numerical superiority, the very shape of the room seemed to suggest imperial supremacy. The oval cabinet table was accompanied by a smaller rectangular table with space for the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Air Staff.³⁸ It could be argued that the setup affirmed the primacy of civilian voices by relegating the military officials to a side table, but having the Chiefs of Staff sitting in a row at the end of the room would have nonetheless affected the tone of discussions. While the Imperial service chiefs sat aloof from the prime ministers, dominion military officers such as General Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, had no dedicated place, instead occupying one of the spaces allocated for dominion advisors. Just as the Imperial defence staff were given greater precedence than their dominion equivalents, British proposals for the post-war reconstruction assumed that the entire manpower of the dominions remained at their disposal. The Chiefs of Staff recommended a wholesale decentralisation of defence manufacturing, asserting that the dominions were less vulnerable sites for aircraft factories than Britain given the potential post-War Soviet threat. Similarly, British Minister of Labour and National Service Ernest Bevin urged that the Conference consider whether 'the British army together with those of the dominions should not be trained in Africa, Australia or even Canada'.³⁹ Bevin hoped this would both encourage emigration and strengthen dominion forces, suggesting 'a soldier, if he wished, be transferred to the reserve there, instead of being brought home'.⁴⁰ His only concern was whether such a programme was practicable without some sort of collective budget. He noted the need for 'something less pronounced than the term 'Empire budget' which might call forth opposition from other countries'.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it was clear that

³⁸ 'Points of Procedure', TNA CAB 21/851.

³⁹ Bevin to Cranborne, 1 February 1944, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Britain had not discarded hopes that the Commonwealth would be a tight-knit economic and military bloc.

Therefore, it is difficult to present the change from Imperial Conferences to Prime Ministers' Conferences as a symbol of unalloyed progress towards Commonwealth equality. In 1986 Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal observed that it would have been more apt if the change in title had occurred after the 1947 transfer of power in India, conceding that 'history is only neat in retrospect'.⁴² However it is also too neat to assume that any name change could represent a definitive transition from imperialism to multilateralism. The 1944 Conference was in effect a de-internationalisation, bringing discussions which had hitherto been conducted on a quasi-diplomatic plane 'in-house'. In moving from St. James's Palace to No. 10 Downing St, the Prime Ministers' Conferences downplayed any projection of 'foreignness' and instead emphasised domesticity. The positioning of the Conferences as 'non diplomatic' was beneficial for Britain. By making Commonwealth consultation as internal as possible, Britain could present itself as the third world power by speaking externally on the Commonwealth's behalf. For sceptics such as Mackenzie King, the aversion to anything imperial was such that he embraced the rebranding as Prime Ministers' Conferences. If Britain used it as a means by which to downplay dominion voices in the public sphere, he could simply repudiate British statements in the Canadian House of Commons.

In 1946 King went further, unsuccessfully trying to restyle the Prime Ministers' Conference as a 'series of consultations' or 'a series of conversations'.⁴³ King was quite justified in this, because the prime ministers had not found it possible to find a time in which they could all be present.

⁴² Ramphal, 'A Working Internationalism', p. 2.

⁴³ King to Lord Addison, 10 May 1946, TNA CAB 21/1798; King to Attlee, 23 April 1946, *ibid.*

Attlee called the meeting for April - May 1946, but as Fraser had already spent January of that year in London he sent his deputy, Walter Nash. This was the first time any dominion had sent a deputy to a Colonial or Imperial Conference in London since 1902. Smuts missed the first week of the Conference and King excused himself from all but the last week of the Conference, citing parliamentary duties. He bewailed even this minimal commitment in the Canadian parliament, stating 'I wish it were not necessary to go' and assuring 'the house that I shall be careful to refrain from committing anyone in a manner that it likely to occasion embarrassment'.⁴⁴ King did not even send a junior minister to the first three weeks of the Conference, writing to Attlee that 'we came to the conclusion that none of those who might have taken my place in this occasion could be spared'.⁴⁵ This experience illustrates that the difficulty in finding a mutually agreeable date was not restricted to later Conferences where there were dozens of parliamentary schedules to consider.

The 1946 Conference therefore had three distinct phases: the first limited to Britain and the antipodean dominions, the second wherein they were joined by Smuts, and the third which Mackenzie King attended, but only after Chifley had commenced his return journey. With some sessions comprising only two prime ministers and a deputy, it is hard not to concur with King that the title Prime Ministers' Conference was misapplied. On the other hand, the structure reflected the reality of the agenda at the time, inasmuch as most links were bilateral between Britain and the dominions. Moreover, the piecemeal nature of the 1946 improved productivity. As Dominions Office official Eric Machting put it in a circular to British High Commissioners: 'While the arrangement under which the dominion representation at the meeting was complete only at the end had certain disadvantages ... it also carried substantial practical advantages ... it was possible to have a wider range of defence discussions than Mr Mackenzie King might

⁴⁴ British High Commission, Ottawa, to Dominions Office, 9 May 1946, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ King to Attlee, 1 May 1946, *ibid.*

have favoured'.⁴⁶ Machting was correct in stating that King's absence allowed more defence discussions, but the range was not necessarily wide. The 1946 Conference was largely regionalised, dealing with the Pacific when discussions were confined to the antipodean dominions, and considering the division of Italian colonies in Africa upon Smuts' arrival. While this allowed precise resolutions to be made, it also limited the opportunity to gain input from other regions. For instance, Britain, Australia and New Zealand determined that the United States would not be given exclusive rights over bases on Commonwealth territory in the South Pacific.⁴⁷ They may have benefitted, however, from Canadian insight as to how to present this stance to the United States. Even before the Conference had ended Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin reported that American Secretary of State James Byrnes was unhappy with the Commonwealth's decision.⁴⁸ Yet as Canada did not have even an observer at the early sessions, there were no means by which the Canadians could provide a North American perspective.

Furthermore, the three-phase structure meant that agreements made in early sessions unravelled as the Conference wore on. On the third day of the Conference, Britain recommended the creation of comprehensive system of defence missions in Commonwealth capitals, along the lines of the Joint Staff Mission in Washington during the Second World War. Under the scheme, dominions would take greater responsibility for defence in their own regions: 'Each member of the Commonwealth therefore should agree to take all steps, political and military, in those areas in which they are directly concerned, so as to maintain conditions favourable to the Commonwealth in peace and to accept joint responsibility for their defence in war'. Chifley objected that the wording went close to erecting a treaty relationship, declaring that 'this passage absolutely impinged on the sovereign control of policy by governments'.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the New

⁴⁶ Eric Machting to British High Commissioners, 14 June 1946, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Eleventh meeting, 3 May 1946, TNA CAB 133/86.

⁴⁸ Twelfth meeting, 6 May 1946, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Fourth meeting, 25 April 1946, *ibid.*

Zealand delegation feared that a regional defence model would give Australia leadership in the Pacific, 'a leadership', Corner wrote, 'which we do not trust as much as [the] British'.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Australia and New Zealand agreed to the proposal, swayed by the promise of large-scale decentralisation of defence manufacturing. However when Smuts arrived at the Conference, he stated that 'he would be very cautious about setting up any new machine'.⁵¹ Nash managed to keep the proposal alive by replacing the term 'service missions' with 'liaison officers'.⁵² Predictably, Mackenzie King refused to consider the proposal, remarking that as he 'warned United Kingdom ministers before he came, it would be quite impossible for him to discuss in any detail questions of defence' on the grounds that his ministers 'were not with him'.⁵³ This put paid to the strongest opportunity to ensure close wartime cooperation was carried through into the post-war Commonwealth. The format of the 1946 Conference meant that proponents of a cohesive defence policy had to win the argument thrice rather than once.

The 1946 conference was the longest of the series. Yet the lengthy proceedings did not inspire any reflection on the future development of the Commonwealth. More time was dedicated to the possibility of Libyan independence than Indian independence. References to India were self-congratulatory. Attlee observed that 'thanks to the peace and security which we had maintained throughout India, her population was increasing at the rate of five million a year'.⁵⁴ Instead of viewing population growth as a challenge for a soon-to-be independent India, it was assumed that independence would not alter trade relationships or instil greater self-reliance. Dominions Secretary Viscount Addison stated that 'Australia was the producing area geographically marked out as the natural one to supply food to India, and he would like to

⁵⁰ Frank Corner to Alister McIntosh and Joseph Wilson, 27 May 1946, in Ian McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels: Letters between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner, 1946-1966* (Wellington, 1999), p. 52.

⁵¹ Tenth meeting, 2 May 1946, TNA CAB 133/86.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Eighteenth meeting, 22 May 1946, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ First meeting, 23 April 1946, *ibid.*

suggest that there were here possibilities of building up trade on a very large scale'.⁵⁵ While the 'Political situation in India' was a distinct agenda item, it was scheduled after the departure of Chifley and before the arrival of King, and ended up as the shortest item in the minutes.⁵⁶ The possibility of partition was not raised. The brief treatment of India may be attributable to an assumption that independence would not come before 1948, and that there would be another Prime Ministers' Conference before the transfer of power. There were further instances where the Conference failed to anticipate the pace of events. Chifley observed that the British mandate in Palestine was an increasing liability, yet he thought that 'it might well continue for twenty-five or fifty years'.⁵⁷ At other times discussion was highly speculative. For instance, the review of foreign policy recorded that 'we could not exclude the possibility that China and Japan might draw more closely together. China might become interested in such a rapprochement'.⁵⁸ On many issues such as the administration of Trieste or the South African mandate over South West Africa, the consensus was to play for time rather than reach a common line. There was little attempt to define how the Conferences should operate in future, or to formally acknowledge the changes that had occurred since the Imperial Conferences. Instead, the agenda item on 'Arrangements for consultations between governments' did little more than reaffirm a resolution taken from the minutes of the 1930 Imperial Conference: 'None of His Majesty's Governments can take any step which might involve the other Governments of His Majesty in any active obligations without their definite consent'.⁵⁹ Given that the 1946 Conference proved to be the last before the arrival of the new Commonwealth, it was remarkable that no attempt was made at modernising the language of consultation at the very least.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Thirteenth meeting, 7 May 1946, *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Eighth meeting, 30 April 1946, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ First meeting 23 April 1946, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Nineteenth meeting, 23 May 1946, *ibid.*

The 1946 gathering was the smallest of all the Imperial or Commonwealth Conferences. There were no Indian delegates, ostensibly on the grounds that the Paris Peace Conference was delayed. The notes on administrative arrangements for the 1946 Conference state that it was 'contemplated' that the Indian representatives to the Peace Conference would also attend the Prime Ministers' Conference, but that 'the contingency did not arise'.⁶⁰ It is likely that there were also difficulties in finding suitably representative Indian delegates who were prepared to participate. The fact that the Conference was intended as a prelude to the Peace Conference may also explain why Southern Rhodesia was not invited. It is surprising that this absence in 1946 was not cited in the 1960s as grounds to rescind Rhodesia's invitation to the Conferences, given that it was often asserted that Rhodesia attended Conferences by weight of unbroken precedent since 1932. The absence of India and Rhodesia, coupled with the delayed arrival of South Africa and Canada, made the 1946 Conference an intimate affair. At one point Bevin opened discussion with the Australian and New Zealand delegations by joking 'Well, when does the executive of the Empire labour party wish to resume?'.⁶¹ The shared ideology of the three Labour governments may explain why 1946 was also the zenith of treating the Conferences as an extension of domestic politics. Visiting leaders were issued with black boxes identical in all but colour to British ministerial boxes, and were provided with office space in the Cabinet Office.⁶² Only New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Nash accepted this offer; perhaps the colonial connotations of a serving Prime Minister working out of the British Cabinet Office were too strong for the other delegations. No papers were circulated to visiting leaders before their arrival, although they were telegraphed a month in advance to suggest heads of discussion. Beyond these subject headings, discussions were open-ended. The 1946 Conference may have come closest to the ideal that Commonwealth discussions would occur without a set agenda and with maximum privacy. While there were fifty-three people on the distribution list for

⁶⁰ 'Notes on Administrative Arrangements', TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁶¹ Crisp, *Chifley*, p. 280.

⁶² 'Notes on Administrative Arrangements', TNA CAB 21/1798.

minutes, from George VI downwards, for sensitive topics the distribution was limited to a dozen, and one session was so secret that it was not minuted at all.⁶³

Given that the 1946 Conference was the smallest of any Colonial, Imperial or Prime Ministers' Conference, with only five delegations, it is surprising that the introduction in 1948 of three new dominions did not prompt any changes to the format.⁶⁴ There was speculation by the Cabinet Office that the additional numbers would make it 'convenient for some questions to be left over for consideration after the meeting had broken up, by some such body as a committee of deputies'.⁶⁵ A 'committee of deputies' following the main Conference, made up of junior ministers or high commissioners, may have been a useful tool to ensure that agreements made by prime ministers were actually acted upon. However, the emphasis on prime ministerial prerogative which the Conferences promoted meant the idea did not gain traction. Nonetheless the suggestion indicated that British officials were struggling to condense an agenda which had taken six weeks in 1937 and five weeks in 1946 into less than a fortnight in 1948. Just as a 'committee of deputies' was deemed unpalatable, there was no thought of excluding the new Asian countries from parts of the Conference. The Chiefs of Staff saw a risk in distributing defence papers to the new dominions, but even these concerns arose 'less from ill will than from lack of security safeguards' within the new delegations.⁶⁶ CRO Deputy Under-Secretary Gilbert Laithwaite suggested the simple expedient of asking the prime ministers to return the papers after they had been read.⁶⁷ The predominant attitude towards the new members was to act as if they had always been there. There was no fanfare at the opening meeting, only affirmations of informality. Nehru opening remarks record that 'already he felt

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ The Imperial Conferences of 1911 and 1921 had comprised six, as they included Newfoundland.

⁶⁵ Cabinet Office, 'Preparations for Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers', 15 June 1948, TNA T 236/1862.

⁶⁶ 'Preparation meeting', 1 September 1948, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

an atmosphere of friendship and goodwill, which could be more important than logical argument', a statement which appeared somewhat dismissive of the place of logic.⁶⁸ In his response Attlee was quoted as 'noticing with interest the emphasis laid on the family nature of these discussions ... He believed that informal discussion of matters of common concern would be more fruitful than eloquence'.⁶⁹ Such remarks tacitly discouraged elaborate premeditated speeches. They also implied that the new members would be unquestioningly accepted as family. Gordon Walker wrote that 'never was the question of the membership of the Asian countries raised' at the 1948 Conference, 'It was simply assumed'.⁷⁰ Mansergh identified 'characteristically Attleean tactics' in this approach, enabling the 'Asian dominions to gain some first-hand experiences of how the Commonwealth worked before formulating their countries' future relationship with it'.⁷¹

Rather than concentrating on initiating the new members into the club, the 1948 Conference gave greater attention to the imminent resignation of an estranged member. The 1946 administrative arrangements file had tersely noted that 'no communication regarding the meeting was made to Eire'.⁷² By October 1948, Irish ministers were on the brink of repealing the External Relations Act. Irish absenteeism at the Conferences could be overlooked, but the end of external association and the formal proclamation of the Irish Republic would leave other Commonwealth countries with no legal basis for the preferential trade and migration status they gave to Ireland. At the instigation of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Attlee convened a meeting with the old dominions at Chequers.⁷³ Irish External Affairs Minister Seán McBride and Finance Minister Patrick McGillan attended under a veil of secrecy. Attlee's press secretary

⁶⁸ First meeting, 11 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Patrick Gordon Walker, *The Commonwealth* (London, 1962), p. 137.

⁷¹ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, p. 333.

⁷² 'Notes on Administrative Arrangements', TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁷³ Robert Spencer, *Canada in World Affairs from UN to NATO 1946-1949* (Toronto, 1959), p. 399.

Phillip Jordan wrote: 'This was not only a completely off the record conference, but those present undertook not to publish the fact that they had been here'.⁷⁴ Given that the status of Ireland had troubled the Commonwealth for decades, the exclusion of the new dominions from the talks was less egregious than may have otherwise been the case. Moreover, Attlee had already stated in the first session of the 1948 Conference that one of his aims as chairman 'had been to restrict the number of plenary meetings, so as to give plenty of opportunity for discussions between smaller groups of ministers'.⁷⁵ The acknowledgement of the role of informal meetings made the gathering at Chequers justifiable. It also strengthened the hand of Southern Rhodesia, which was invited again to the Conference after an absence in 1946. Huggins attended plenary sessions and also held an important sideline meeting with Welensky, informing him that the British government would not countenance an amalgamation of Southern and Northern Rhodesia but would consider a federation.⁷⁶ It is worth speculating whether the renewed invitation to Southern Rhodesia was a way to increase the number of 'white' attendees with the advent of three Asian delegations. Huggins certainly spoke plainly, despite being the only prime minister whose right to attend was not guaranteed. He proclaimed it was 'inconsistent for countries which sought to loosen the ties between Commonwealth countries to ask at the same time for increased consultation'.⁷⁷ On defence, Huggins asserted that 'unless a united stand was made, the Commonwealth countries would disappear one by one'.⁷⁸ By contrast, Nehru airily stated that 'since the Soviet Union was not likely to be ready to fight for eight to ten years ... there was a period of grace which could be used to mould the future in such a way as to avert war'.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Phillip Jordan to Campbell Moodie, Canadian High Commission, London, 8 October 1948, 'British Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference, 1948 - proposals', LAC RG25-G-2, volume 3558, file 1075-40.

⁷⁵ First meeting, 11 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

⁷⁶ Don Taylor, *The Years of Challenge: The Commonwealth and the British Empire, 1945-1958* (London, 1959), p. 89.

⁷⁷ Eighth meeting, 18 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

⁷⁸ Twelfth meeting, 20 October 1948, *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Huggins' hopes for close defence cooperation were backed by Pakistan, which had an obvious interest in securing a mutual defence commitment. Liaquat Ali Khan was the most direct of the new members in questioning the purpose of the Commonwealth, declaring:

The Commonwealth might be likened to a club which, beginning with foundation members, had gradually extended its membership, the latest joined members having equal rights, privileges and obligations with the others. But it was not his conception of a club that it should offer, as its sole amenity, the opportunity to read the newspapers in solitude and then to go home.⁸⁰

By the twelfth meeting, Ali Khan was directly calling for mutual defence: 'if any member of the Commonwealth were attacked, whether in open warfare or otherwise, would all other Commonwealth countries come to its aid, it being understood that such aid must not be confined to the Commonwealth members of British stock?'.⁸¹ Ali Khan's urgings were a veiled request for support in the event of further conflict with India, although he also pointed out that partition had left Pakistan with difficult external borders. West Pakistan had responsibility for the infamous North West Frontier with Afghanistan, and East Pakistan shared a border with Burma, which was made independent outside of the Commonwealth for fear dominion status would further inflame its communist opposition. In contrast, Ceylon was almost conjuring up threats in the hope of demonstrating its commitment to shared defence. Senanayake said that 'she would take her full share in fighting the cold war', and conjectured 'might not enemy bases be established in Burma, Malaya or Indonesia?'.⁸² In spite of such pledges, little progress was made on defence cooperation. Attlee suggested periodical meetings of Commonwealth defence ministers, but Fraser gloomily noted that even the 1946 Conference's recommendation of liaison offices within high commissions had not been fully implemented.⁸³ Nonetheless, discussing defence at the 1948 Conference was an achievement in itself, given that India and Pakistan were at war with each other over Kashmir. In discussions on the sidelines of the

⁸⁰ Seventh meeting, 18 October 1948, *ibid.*

⁸¹ Twelfth meeting, 20 October 1948, *ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Eleventh meeting, 20 October 1948, *ibid.*

Conference, Nehru rejected Ali Khan's proposal of a plebiscite, and made a counterproposal to partition Kashmir.⁸⁴ While there were no major military operations during the Conference, within a fortnight of its conclusion an Indian offensive ended the Pakistani siege of Poonch. A ceasefire was signed by the two countries in January 1949.⁸⁵ The participation of Nehru and Ali Khan in sessions on defence policy, whilst receiving constant briefings on combat against each other's countries, exemplified the robustness of the 'club rules'. The precept that nothing could be discussed without the consent of the countries involved was so strong that war between two members was not an impediment to participation in defence talks. There was an unspoken assumption that the Conferences were not a forum for discussing intra-Commonwealth conflict.

In spite of the example of the 1948 Conference, the 1949 edition which followed just five months later was dedicated to an intra-Commonwealth issue: the possibility of accommodating India within the Commonwealth as a republic. There was no attempt to disguise the fact that the Conference did not cover the usual gamut of issues; the 1949 communiqué concluded by declaring 'these constitutional questions have been the sole subject of discussion at full meetings of Prime Ministers'.⁸⁶ Such wording obviously left room for 'less than full' meetings. For instance, there was a selective informal meeting between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan and Ceylon regarding Indian membership. The meeting undermined the Commonwealth mythology that leaders spoke with complete candour in plenary sessions: 'Mr Ali Khan and Mr Senanayake were much more outspoken than they had been at the plenary session in the morning as to the doubts which they felt about the real will and intentions of the government of India'.⁸⁷ Despite being dubbed an informal session, the meeting occurred at No.

⁸⁴ Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London, 2010), p. 140.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142; *ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸⁶ 1949 communiqué, in *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 30.

⁸⁷ 'Note of an Informal Meeting, 22 April 1949', TNA CAB 133/91.

10 on the same afternoon as the plenary session. This contrasted with the informal discussions on Irish membership in 1948, which occurred at Chequers on a Sunday, and therefore were clearly set apart from the plenary sessions. With no spatial distinction from a plenary session, the 1949 informal talks risked giving an impression of an ‘inner circle’ working against India. Moreover, the conduct of the meeting was not perceptibly more informal. Prime ministerial advisors and the secretariat from the Cabinet Office remained in attendance and minutes were still distributed. The trope of informal meetings was also used to hold discussions on topics other than Indian membership, in spite of the communiqué’s claim that 1949 was a single-issue Conference. Detailed talks were held on the Berlin airlift, to which Australia, New Zealand and South Africa had contributed aircrews. Offers of aircraft by these three countries were only turned down to avoid the Soviets claiming a breach of Four Power overflying rights.⁸⁸ Despite being the home of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan during the war, Canada declined to offer crews. Pearson’s chief aide, Escott Reid, warned that it could be perceived as Canada ‘behaving very much as a colony ... recruiting forces in Canada for the United Kingdom’.⁸⁹ While Canada avoided informal defence meetings for fear of colonial connotations, Ceylon sought greater participation. Senanayake told the British High Commissioner in Colombo that he was disappointed at not being invited to some of the ‘conversations’ which occurred at the Conference. Given his attendance at the informal meeting on Indian membership, this most likely referred to the defence talks. Ceylon’s exclusion was hard to justify given that it – unlike any other Commonwealth country – had signed a defence agreement with Britain upon independence, granting Britain basing rights and promising ‘co-operation in regard to defence matters’.⁹⁰ The agreement had been cited by the Soviet Union as justification for vetoing Ceylon’s United Nations application, and it must have been galling to be concurrently excluded from informal meetings at the Prime Ministers’ Conferences.

⁸⁸ James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Growing Up Allied* (Toronto, 1980), p. 49.

⁸⁹ Escott Reid to Pearson, 13 October 1948, *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁹⁰ Ivor Jennings, *The Constitution of Ceylon* (Bombay, 1951), p. 247.

Sometimes the signifiers of differentiation between members were inadvertent. When Bevin was handed a note to remind him not to mention a topic that India, Pakistan and Ceylon had not been briefed on, he absent-mindedly proceeded to read the note aloud. According to Joe Garner, Bevin's exclamation 'Oh! I suppose I was not meant to read that out – but that seems the position' was received good-humouredly.⁹¹ The incident was telling in two ways. Firstly, the fact that Bevin read verbatim from his advisors' notes, to the extent of reciting warnings against doing so, demonstrates how civil servants moulded the Conferences by the advice they provided before, during and after the meetings. Given that the Conferences met in the Cabinet Room, it was unsurprising that plenary sessions were often a recapitulation of prewritten briefs, just as Cabinet discussions more commonly comprised routine submissions than impassioned debate. Secondly, the good-humoured response signified the mutual awareness that different delegations would be treated differently, often on the judgement of a civil servant rather than the directive of a minister. It was 'open secrets' such as this which made the Conferences workable. For instance, Indian membership was unambiguously a decision for the Commonwealth to make collectively, but it was only Attlee who sent envoys to each Commonwealth capital before the 1949 Conference seeking to persuade India to retain some sort of crown link, and to convince the other prime ministers to retain India even if it didn't.⁹² Additionally, Attlee had individual meetings with each prime minister before the Conference opened. These actions could have easily been seen as attempts to 'divide and rule', but they appear to have been accepted as part of the prerogatives Britain held as host. Outwardly, scheduling courtesy calls with visiting leaders on arrival was a nicety, but CRO Permanent Under-Secretary Percivale Liesching admitted it enabled Attlee to discuss India with all other prime ministers without resorting to excluding Nehru from any plenary session.⁹³ The ploy of

⁹¹ Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), p. 297.

⁹² 'Reports from Emissaries', TNA CAB 21/1821.

⁹³ Liesching to Archibald Nye, 3 May 1949, TNA DO 35/2209.

interspersing the plenary sessions with informal talks was to some extent suggested by India. It was Indian External Affairs Secretary-General Girija Shankar Bajpai, rather than any British official, who in the lead up to the 1949 Conference invoked the precedent of the drafting of the Balfour Declaration in 1926, which he recalled largely occurred in groups of two or three. Bajpai had given the mode of discussion more thought than the British hosts: Commonwealth Relations Parliamentary Under-Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker conceded ‘I did not know whether we or anyone else had given detailed thought to the mechanics of discussion’.⁹⁴

It was this continuity – the positioning of the 1949 London Declaration accepting Indian membership as the natural successor to the 1926 Balfour Declaration which enshrined the equality of status between Britain and the dominions – that enabled the Conferences to continue without modification in form despite no longer being a monarchical club. The format was not perceived as an imperial hangover despite its origins in the Colonial and Imperial Conferences. This may be because some visiting delegates such as Bajpai or South African Finance Minister Nicolaas Havenga – who had both attended the 1926 Imperial Conference – had a longer institutional memory than most British advisors.⁹⁵ Visiting delegations were no less familiar with the structure and could invoke Imperial precedents when it suited them, for instance the convention of not discussing immigration or ‘native affairs’. Furthermore, the continued membership of India as a republic made it difficult for Commonwealth detractors to paint participation in the Conferences as a collaborationist act with the former imperial power. Sections of the Indian and South African parliaments ritually criticised the Commonwealth, but Indian republicanism, coupled with the departure of Burma and Ireland, demonstrated that prime ministers had untrammelled freedom at the Conferences as they could withdraw from the Commonwealth at any time. Thus participation in the Prime Ministers’ Conferences did not

⁹⁴ Gordon Walker to CRO, 1 April 1949, TNA CAB 21/1821.

⁹⁵ ‘London Day’, *Daily Telegraph* (London), 24 November 1952.

garner the stigma that nationalists attributed to other gatherings in London, such as the African Conference at Lancaster House in 1948. This gathering of black and 'coloured' legislative council members was meant to serve a similar purpose to the early Colonial and Imperial Conferences: boost the prestige of colonial legislators and give them a taste of how government was conducted in London. However, the African Conference was unambitious in scope. Much of the schedule was given over to quaint tours of the English countryside. *The Spectator* reported that African leaders were 'struck by our patchwork fields as seen from the train'.⁹⁶ Don Taylor observed that 'it could only have happened in Britain, this fascinating mixture of an annual political party congress and a conducted travel agency tour'.⁹⁷ More importantly, participants in the 1948 African Conference later faced accusations from rival nationalists of being 'moderates' handpicked by Britain. Taylor argued that involvement in the African Conference proved to be 'political suicide' for Gold Coast nationalist leader Joseph Boakye Danquah. Supporters of Nkrumah, whose movement originated in a split from Danquah's United Gold Coast Convention, depicted Danquah as 'guilty of collaboration with the imperial enemy'.⁹⁸ This unintended consequence of the 1948 African Conference may explain why the Gold Coast was not invited to the Prime Ministers' Conferences until independence as Ghana in 1957 despite Nkrumah being granted the style of Prime Minister in 1952. Southern Rhodesia would have provided a precedent for attendance before full independence; especially as from 1953 Huggins attended as Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland which comprised the self-governing colony of Southern Rhodesia and the protectorates of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

Given that Huggins remained the only 'honorary' member of the Conferences, the period from 1949 to 1957 was one of unprecedented stability in the constitutional structure and the number

⁹⁶ 'A Spectator's Notebook', *The Spectator*, 30 September 1948, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Taylor, *Years of Challenge*, p. 83.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

of members. There were no new members to approve, and Pakistan and Ceylon's applications at the 1955 and 1956 Conferences respectively to continue membership as republics were uncontroversial.⁹⁹ Therefore the Conferences had a near decade-long window in which to cement their purpose and procedure. Yet the Conferences continued to be ad hoc inasmuch as the agenda was dominated by whatever the most pressing global issue was at the time each Conference opened. In January 1951 proceedings focused on the resolution which the United States had just put before the UN, condemning the People's Republic of China as an aggressor in the Korean War. There were fears that such a censure would provoke China into open conflict with the West. In such a charged atmosphere, the Conference took on a more urgent tone. In the recorded minutes, this took the form of enumerated motions:

Ministers agreed –

(1) To instruct their representatives in Washington and New York to seek to delay further discussion of Korea in the First Committee of the General Assembly for at least a week.

It was agreed –

(2) That the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff should be invited to attend a meeting on Monday 8th January 3pm to give a military appreciation.¹⁰⁰

Thus the 1951 Conference made explicit resolutions in the style of an Imperial Conference or domestic cabinet minute; the very sort of formal decisions the Prime Ministers' Conferences claimed not to make. Gordon Walker observed that the 1951 Conference 'became almost an organ of collective policy. Continuous and unanimous messages were sent by the Prime Ministers from Downing Street to Washington'.¹⁰¹ Words were also backed by action. Canadian, Australian and New Zealand troops and an Indian ambulance unit were already committed to Korea as part of a British Army force styled the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade; it was expanded in July 1951 into the 1st Commonwealth Division.¹⁰² This was the last theatre in which

⁹⁹ Pakistan later moved from a ceremonial to an executive presidency after a military coup in October 1958. Fifth meeting, 4 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136; seventh meeting, 4 July 1956, TNA CAB 133/148.

¹⁰⁰ Fourth meeting, 5 January 1951, TNA CAB 133/90.

¹⁰¹ Patrick Gordon Walker, *The Commonwealth* (London, 1962), pp. 315-6.

¹⁰² David French, *Army, Empire, and Cold War: The British Army and Military Policy, 1945-1971* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 133-4.

the Commonwealth acted as an integrated military unit. While not all countries participated in the military effort, nor adhered to the Commonwealth line at the UN – Pakistan abstained and India voted against the Chinese aggression resolution when a vote was taken at the UN General Assembly on 1 February 1951 – the Korean War firmly oriented the 1951 Conference towards the Far East. It was not until the ninth meeting that the defence of Europe was discussed. Nehru participated fully in the defence discussions. Even though Indian service personnel in Korea were in a non-combat role, for the first time in history they had been sent by an independent Indian government, rather than being deployed by an imperial regime. The cooperation in Korea appeared to fulfil Mackenzie King's 1946 theory that a centralised Commonwealth defence policy would prompt a begrudging response in wartime; whereas a free hand would demonstrate that each country 'could be trusted to respond wholeheartedly to the call'.¹⁰³ While a Commonwealth contingent remained in Korea until 1957, there were no moves toward the 'single command' Attlee espoused at the 1951 Conference, whereby all Commonwealth countries would contribute to a Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington in anticipation of a future global war.¹⁰⁴ Once again, the Commonwealth resisted erecting a standing organisation – instead it could point to the Commonwealth Brigade in Korea in addition to two world wars as signs of its ability to make effective ad hoc arrangements when war did occur.

Yet the potential to present the 1951 Conference as the high point of Commonwealth cooperation was undercut by Pakistan's decision to boycott unless Kashmir was discussed. This proved no empty threat, as Ali Khan did not attend the first four sessions, nor did he send any observers. Pakistan's absence was the first item of business, taking precedence over Korea. In preparations for the Conference Attlee had told Ali Khan that it 'would be contrary to custom

¹⁰³ Eighteenth meeting, 22 May 1946, TNA CAB 133/86.

¹⁰⁴ Fifth meeting, 8 January 1951, NAA A1209 1957/5822.

to discuss at such a meeting disputes between individual members of the Commonwealth'.¹⁰⁵ 'Custom' was a regular trope used by British organisers to shape the Conferences, but it was difficult to justify the invocation of custom in this case. Hitherto, there had not been any intra-Commonwealth territorial disputes, nor could it be argued that Kashmir was a case of domestic jurisdiction given that the issue arose directly out of India's partition into two countries. Ali Khan's response to Attlee had been to employ another Conference ruse and propose an 'informal' meeting, but he added that it should be attended by all prime ministers. The minutes note, in typically understated language, that 'Mr Attlee had found it difficult to distinguish such a meeting from a formal session'.¹⁰⁶ On this occasion, South Africa's apathy for Commonwealth cooperation proved beneficial. South African delegation leader T.E. Dönges declared that regarding Kashmir, South Africa 'could not usefully contribute but he saw no reason why the good offices of others should not be offered'.¹⁰⁷ This enabled the Conference to collectively send a telegram to Ali Khan inviting him to hold informal talks on Kashmir in London, as South Africa's opt-out would sufficiently differentiate such talks from plenary meetings. Ali Khan did not respond immediately, but the Canadian High Commissioner to Pakistan informed St Laurent that Ali Khan would 'not insist' on the participation of South Africa in discussions, implying an acceptance of the proposal.¹⁰⁸ Ali Khan flew to London over the weekend and participated in the remainder of the Conference. The informal appearance of the Kashmir talks was enhanced by the fact they were facilitated by Menzies, who had caught a cold in the London winter. Hence the talks occurred in Menzies' suite at The Savoy.¹⁰⁹ This episode, where a collective telegram, a Canadian High Commissioner and an Australian chairman helped to overcome Pakistan's refusal to accept the initial British invitation, seemed to suggest some progress towards a multilateral approach to Commonwealth relations. Furthermore, the almost

¹⁰⁵ First meeting, 4 January 1951, TNA CAB 133/90.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Third meeting, 5 January 1951, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ 'Kashmir Problem', *Canberra Times*, 11 January 1951, p. 1.

comic concept of the prime ministers debating Kashmir at Menzies' bedside, echoing Mackenzie King's involvement in the 1948 Conference whilst bedridden, indicate that for all the misapplication of the term informal, the Conferences could be genuinely unpretentious.

After accommodating Pakistan's demands through informal meetings in 1951, the boycott tactic was not used again at any Conference until 1966. However, the 1951 Conference may have made the use of informal meetings into the rule rather than the exception. With the return of Churchill as chairman, informal meetings were employed with increasing frequency as a cover for defence talks. At the 1953 Conference, Churchill had spoken optimistically of India committing up to five thousand troops to Korea and acting as a bridge between East and West, stating: 'It was a great compliment to India that more than any other country in the world she found herself trusted by both sides'.¹¹⁰ Yet by the 1955 Conference, attempts to get India to contribute to Commonwealth defence had ceased. Mansergh argued that the turning point for India came in 1954, when Pakistan joined the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and accepted American military aid.¹¹¹ India hardened in its non-alignment, and at the 1955 Conference sessions on defence were styled 'additional' meetings to 'avoid any unnecessary flavour of exclusion'.¹¹² With four such 'additional' meetings taking place on four consecutive afternoons, the 1955 Conference was almost like two Conferences in parallel. Pakistan was the only new Commonwealth member to attend the session on the Middle East, while Canada chose not to attend as 'their absence would help to mark the fact that defence questions were not the exclusive concern of the old Commonwealth'.¹¹³ In reality some topics were indeed restricted to the old Commonwealth. The cumbersome subject heading 'NATO, Europe, Africa and ANZAM' was used instead of 'world-wide defence policy' for the first additional meeting,

¹¹⁰ Second meeting, 4 June 1953, in TNA CAB 133/135.

¹¹¹ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, p. 345.

¹¹² A.J. Brown to Snelling, 24 June 1955, TNA DO 35/5172.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

in order to confine invitations to the old Commonwealth and the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.¹¹⁴ Such prolix titles were unconvincing, but mutually beneficial, as India and Ceylon preserved their non-aligned status while other members held meetings at their convenience, all while professing that each member was an equal participant in the Conferences.

Despite the system of parallel defence meetings reaching its height under Churchill, the Conferences chaired by him in 1953 and 1955 were on less of a war footing than those chaired by Attlee. Bevin and Attlee's anxiety regarding the Soviet Union had permeated the Conferences from 1946 to 1951. At the end of the 1946 Conference, Evatt joked 'just as well we came, or they'd have declared war'.¹¹⁵ Frank Corner recounted that Bevin had exclaimed 'I don't feel safe in my bed' whilst speaking of the Communist threat, and in an 'almost hysterical state' had 'clutched at a plan ... for war against Russia drawn up by the Chiefs of Staff'.¹¹⁶ Churchill was also apocalyptic in tone, but his preoccupation was nuclear weapons. He argued they made open warfare with Russia almost unfathomable due to the likelihood of mutual destruction.¹¹⁷ On occasions his fervour for nuclear technology was more self-congratulatory than detailed. For instance, he boasted to the 1955 Conference that 'as long ago as 1931 he had written: "nuclear energy is incomparably greater than the molecular energy which we use today"'.¹¹⁸ In the following year, the British focus on nuclear energy almost extended into advertorial. The 1956 Conference included a long briefing by Lord Salisbury under the heading 'nuclear energy for peaceful use', in which he proclaimed: 'the United Kingdom would not be content to develop only the type of reactor he had hitherto described. The atomic energy authority were already studying seven other types of reactor systems'.¹¹⁹ Even before the briefing, a Canadian advisor

¹¹⁴ ANZAM stood for Australia, New Zealand and Malaya and referred to the Anglo-New Zealand-Australian arrangements for the defence of Malaya. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Corner to McIntosh and Joseph Wilson, 27 May 1946, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 49.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁷ Third meeting, 2 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Eighth meeting, 4 July 1956, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, London June-July 1956; regional defence discussions', TNA DO 35/5172.

caustically observed that the agenda item ‘appears designed to let them advertise their position as a prospective supplier of reactors. As far as is known we would not wish to do any advertising’.¹²⁰ Remarks that the Conferences were being used as a vehicle for advertising insinuated a decline in the substance of the agenda, or at least a more idiosyncratic selection of topics. Some of the subheadings in the provisional 1953 agenda were almost colloquial, sounding much like Churchill’s personal musings: ‘Maintenance of world peace – where does Moscow stand? What are the intentions of Peking?’.¹²¹ On other occasions broad subjects disguised specific concerns. For instance, a daily communiqué in 1953 stated that Prime Ministers ‘held a general discussion on the problems of the Middle East’, but talks were exclusively about British bases in the Suez Canal zone.¹²² A discrepancy between subject heading and content was not in itself problematic, given the oft-proclaimed notion that the Conferences discuss whatever the prime ministers wished, but it also suggested that discussion was being unduly driven by the predilections of the host.

The Conferences of 1953, 1955 and 1956 failed to anticipate future challenges for the Commonwealth despite having relative leisure in which to consider them. Economically, the sterling area was strengthening and Chancellor of the Exchequer R.A. ‘Rab’ Butler had built up closer cooperation with his Commonwealth colleagues through monthly messages to Commonwealth finance ministers.¹²³ Politically, the situation was also clear: the ageing Churchill had an obvious successor in Eden. The 1955 Conference, two months before Churchill’s retirement, had the feeling of a handover meeting. In the first session Churchill paid tribute to Eden’s diplomatic finesse, declaring: ‘Since the last meeting a number of problems had been

¹²⁰ Department of External Affairs, Economic Division to Commonwealth Division, 25 May 1956, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1956’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4776, file 50085-F-40.

¹²¹ Provisional Programme, TNA CAB 133/136.

¹²² Third meeting, 5 June 1953, in ‘Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, London, June 1953’, TNA CAB 133/135.

¹²³ Fourth meeting, 3 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136.

solved ... in each of these settlements the Foreign Secretary had played a leading part'.¹²⁴ Equally at the opening session of the 1956 Conference, Eden paid homage to Churchill by accepting Menzies's suggestion to send a 'message of greeting and goodwill' to Churchill on behalf of the Conference. Churchill replied with 'good wishes for the success of the Prime Ministers' deliberations'.¹²⁵ Such a ritual exchange of telegrams was more properly the preserve of the monarch than any retired prime minister, if required at all by an ostensibly informal Conference. It also reinforced the impression that the Britain remained the 'first among equals'. Another differentiator was the imbalance in titles at the table. At one session of the 1955 Conference, the dozen-strong British delegation included eight knights and a peer, in contrast to most other Commonwealth monarchies who could only boast one knight.¹²⁶ The imbalance was amplified by the blurred lines between the British delegation and the secretariat. At the fourth meeting of the 1955 Conference, diplomat Sir Harold Caccia was listed as a member of the British delegation, but at the ninth meeting he reappeared as part of the secretariat provided by the Cabinet Office.¹²⁷

Having served a long apprenticeship, Eden had an opportunity to reshape the Conferences as chair in 1956. Yet he made few structural changes. One small move towards making the Conferences less anglocentric was Eden's invitation to Nehru to give the foreign affairs review which Eden himself had given at past Conferences. Nehru's review reads as almost identical in style to those of Eden and other British Foreign Secretaries; although this may have been a consequence of the Cabinet Office's continued hold over the composition of the minutes. It took the conventional form of a *tour d'horizon*, opening by stating: 'the problems raised by the present position of China were perhaps the most important that had faced the world since the

¹²⁴ First meeting, 31 January 1955, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ First meeting, 27 June 1956, TNA CAB 133/148; Third meeting, 29 June 1956, *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Fourth meeting, 3 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136.

¹²⁷ Ninth meeting, 8 February 1955, *ibid.*

end of the War'.¹²⁸ Despite the moderate tone of his review, Menzies attacked Nehru, declaring that large size of the Indian armed forces undermined Nehru's claim that friendly relations with Russia and China were India's primary form of defence. Nehru unconvincingly responded that large forces were required 'in order to prevent irregular incursions by foreigners'; presumably trying to avoid identifying Pakistan as India's biggest threat in front of the Pakistani Prime Minister.¹²⁹ Menzies' aggression was inflamed by the selection of Nehru to lead the foreign affairs review. Australian High Commissioner Eric Harrison argued that Menzies' inclusion in the Australian delegation to the 1937 Imperial Conference gave him seniority over Nehru even though he had attended one fewer Prime Ministers' Conference than him.¹³⁰ Only Nehru's death in 1962 made Menzies' claim undisputed. The spat demonstrated the difficulties in modernising the Conferences: their ad hoc development, without a clear break from the Imperial Conferences, meant that the pre-War meetings were still a source of precedent. Another imperial legacy was the attendance of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. This was the only membership question which Eden tackled at the 1956 Conference, and even this was only prompted by the impending retirement of Huggins, who had been ennobled as Viscount Malvern of Rhodesia the previous year. It had hitherto been emphasised that Huggins attended the Conferences by personal invitation. As this invitation was first extended to him for the 1937 Imperial Conference, it could be validly claimed that the precedent predated the Prime Ministers' Conference and did not create a precedent for the inclusion of other self-governing colonies. Equally, it could be argued that the personal invitation lapsed with his retirement. The tenth session of the 1956 Conference was dedicated to the topic, with Eden proposing 'to regularise the position'.¹³¹ He suggested that Rhodesia and Nyasaland would in future attend Conferences 'as of right'.¹³² However Eden could secure no more than the status quo. The minutes recorded

¹²⁸ Fifth meeting, 2 July 1956, in TNA CAB 133/148.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Harrison to Menzies, 16 May 1961, Menzies Papers, NLA MS4936, series 1, folder 122.

¹³¹ Tenth meeting, 5 July 1956, TNA CAB 133/148.

¹³² *Ibid.*

that the ‘general feeling’ was that a right to attend would be ‘unacceptable at this stage’; instead, the communiqué stated that the prime ministers ‘agreed that they would welcome the continued participation of the Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland’.¹³³ In effect, this was a defeat for Eden and the first sign the new Commonwealth would shape the membership; Huggins’ successor, Roy Welensky, would have to rely on the goodwill of the full members.

Eden’s success as a diplomat paradoxically made him less suited to Commonwealth relations, which this thesis argues were a sort of non-diplomacy, more akin to a domestic cabinet meeting than a courtly treaty negotiation. Britain was free to make decisions without input from Commonwealth prime ministers, but they did expect to be informed before those decisions were made public. During his time as Foreign Secretary, Eden had a reputation for tardiness in contacting Commonwealth capitals. At the 1955 Conference, Menzies complained that Canberra had received no warning of new commitments of British forces to Europe.¹³⁴ Eden reported that he had ‘fully intended to notify other Commonwealth countries of the United Kingdom plans ... the difficulty has arisen because he has been compelled to seek authority to make this offer at a moment when the London Conferences [on the status of West Germany] appeared to be about to fail’.¹³⁵ Eden concluded by saying ‘the telegram was overtaken by the event’, an excuse which he applied almost verbatim the following year at the start of the Suez invasion. At 2:40 a.m. on 2 August 1956, Eden sent an emergency telegram to Commonwealth capitals, stating ‘I am sorry not to have been able to telegraph earlier but we have been engaged in continuous and indeed hour-to-hour discussion and it has not been possible before now’.¹³⁶ Other works have detailed the failure of Britain to keep the Commonwealth informed

¹³³ 1956 Communiqué, *The Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 51.

¹³⁴ Second meeting, 1 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*; Eden, telegram to prime ministers, 2 August 1956, TNA FO 371/119096.

throughout the Suez crisis.¹³⁷ For the purposes of this thesis it is sufficient to note that there were few calls to hold a Prime Ministers' Conference on Suez. Malcolm Templeton noted that even in New Zealand – the only Commonwealth country to lend material aid to Britain during the conflict – there was only one reference in External Affairs files to convening a Prime Ministers' Conference on Suez. That reference regarded an opposition motion in a British House of Commons debate, to which Eden responded that Prime Ministers had been in London recently and would probably want to remain at home during 'these critical days'.¹³⁸ Eden's use of 'probably' implied that he had assumed that Commonwealth leaders did not want a Conference, rather than actually asking them. Eden's lack of consultation was lamentable given that Commonwealth actors played important roles in seeking a peaceful resolution. Menzies chaired the Suez Users Conference at Lancaster House in August 1956, and all Commonwealth countries other than Canada and South Africa attended it.¹³⁹ India was a key conduit for Nasser at the Conference, presenting his proposal for an international advisory board under Egyptian sovereignty rather than full international control.¹⁴⁰ It should have been an asset to Britain that a Commonwealth country was acceptable to both sides as an intermediary. Similarly, it was Canada which facilitated the UN peacekeeping force which enabled a ceasefire.¹⁴¹ These diplomatic initiatives made the 'mother' country of the Commonwealth look like the most immature member. Yet as the Prime Ministers' Conferences laid such emphasis on the personality of individual leaders, Eden's retirement in favour of Macmillan removed the most obvious target for opprobrium at the 1957 Conference. Moreover, as the Commonwealth had no standing organisation, there were no institutional failings to review and no body to reform.

¹³⁷ James Eayrs, *The Commonwealth and Suez: A Documentary Survey* (Oxford, 1964), p. 176.

¹³⁸ Scoones to Alister McIntosh, 9 November 1956, ANZ PM 217/1/12, in Malcolm Templeton, *Ties of Blood and Empire: New Zealand's Involvement in Middle East Defence and the Suez Crisis, 1947-57* (Auckland, 1994), p. 264-5.

¹³⁹ Eayrs, *The Commonwealth and Suez*, p. 82.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁴¹ John Melady, *Pearson's Prize: Canada and the Suez Crisis* (Toronto, 2006), p. 146.

The 1957 Conference opened almost a year to the day after the 1956 Conference, as if to highlight the routine nature of the gathering.¹⁴² The addition of Ghana was fortuitous for Britain: it was harder for visiting prime ministers to remonstrate over Suez when the events preceded independence for one of their number. Additionally, the defeat of the Canadian Liberals on the eve of the Conference meant the Canadian delegation wouldn't gain plaudits for Pearson's success in establishing the UN peacekeeping force in Suez. After two decades in opposition, the Progressive Conservative Party led by Diefenbaker had less even less experience of government than the Ghanaian ruling party. The combined result of these new faces was a more placid Conference than might have been expected for the first meeting post-Suez. Of the eleven delegations, only Menzies and Nehru had attended previously as leaders.¹⁴³ The clubbish feel which still permeated the Conferences created a 'new boy' effect which inhibited members from pushing for major changes at their first appearance. This 'new boy' phenomenon was not just a patronising figment of the British imagination. Before the 1960 Conference, Nkrumah told the Acting British High Commissioner to Ghana that being a 'new boy' stopped him questioning in plenary session the presence of Rhodesia and Nyasaland at the 1957 Conference, although he discussed the matter privately with Nehru.¹⁴⁴ The implication was that this was a one-off effect, similar to the way in which India did not formally raise becoming a republic at its first post-independence Conference in 1948, even though the topic predominated at the 1949 Conference. Therefore the host nation had a final opportunity in 1957 to mould the Commonwealth in its preferred image before the new arrivals made their impression. Whereas previous Conferences had only discussed the purpose of the Commonwealth when a constitutional change necessitated it, in 1957 efforts were made to bulk up the Commonwealth

¹⁴² J.B. Hunt to Norman Brook, 11 April 1957, TNA DO 35/5174.

¹⁴³ Foreign Office Information Policy Department memorandum, 2 August 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

¹⁴⁴ CRO Memorandum, September 1959, in 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference 1960', TNA DO 35/7642.

concept. For instance, the CRO proposed a ‘Commonwealth Charter’.¹⁴⁵ What the ‘statement of principles’ was to entail was ambiguous – the primary intention was to have a ‘valuable effect on public opinion, both here and in the world at large’.¹⁴⁶ It is notable that British domestic opinion was the first priority, rather than actual rights or reforms. The proposal was redolent of a campaign to get the new members ‘signed up’ to something before they joined other international organisations. As Ian MacLennan, British High Commissioner to Ghana put it, the 1957 Conference was ‘a useful inoculation against foreign pests’ for Nkrumah’.¹⁴⁷

At first glance, the 1957 Conference effectively integrated its new member. Nkrumah got on well with Eric Louw, leader of the South African delegation, to the astonishment of MacLennan: ‘Their mutual cordiality is illustrated by the fact that at the small luncheon party that Mr. Louw gave for Nkrumah they engaged in a good humoured discussion of apartheid policy!’.¹⁴⁸ This led MacLennan to conclude that the Conference had been ‘the best possible education for the Ghana government’.¹⁴⁹ As successful as this sounded, it also signalled a return to the earlier, educative role of the Conferences where learning the ways of Westminster was the primary aim. There was a danger that politeness could be mistaken for progress. Macmillan wrote in his memoirs of a ‘lovely summer day’ talking in the garden of No. 10 with Nehru and Pakistani Prime Minister H.S. Suhrawardy during the 1957 Conference. Macmillan thought that ‘since these two men are on the worst of terms and *never* meet – in India or in London – this was rather a risk’. Yet the talk ‘went off very well’, a fact he attributed to the calming surrounds of the garden being analogous to ‘a country parsonage’.¹⁵⁰ Macmillan mused that ‘Here at any rate there might emerge a function for the Commonwealth as a whole; a role which especially the

¹⁴⁵ Morrice James to Lintott, 12 April 1957, TNA DO 35/5174.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ MacLennan to Gilbert Laithwaite, 9 August 1957, TNA DO 35/6191.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm: 1956-1959* (London, 1971), p. 381; *ibid.*, p. 380.

old country might usefully play in the capital city, outside the fevered corridors of the United Nations. Here in these gatherings might be an opportunity, no longer for authority, but for mediation'.¹⁵¹ As genial as Macmillan's recollection was, mediation was a long way from unity, and the scene was emblematic of the Commonwealth becoming a 'walled garden' – inward-looking and marginal to the 'fevered' conduct of international affairs. The inscription of the Commonwealth itself as an agenda item in 1957 should have been a chance to address the failings in Commonwealth consultation made manifest by Suez, but the improvements recommended by the CRO, such as the formation of a Commonwealth development bank, were not well developed.¹⁵² Furthermore, it was disingenuous for Macmillan to suggest that the 'old country' had renounced its use of authority. During the 1957 Conference the Colonial Secretary had given a report on 'General constitutional development in the colonies' including a tentative timeline for decolonisation in some territories.¹⁵³ It was stressed however that Britain retained sole responsibility. Though the report was for information only, Colonial Office Permanent Under-Secretary Hilton Poynton initially resisted a reprise at the 1960 Conference: 'I do not think, however, that it is quite accurate to refer to the 'Colonial Secretary's customary review of his responsibilities ... He did not give such a general review in 1956 (to go no further back) ... it would not be desirable to take the initiative'.¹⁵⁴ Poynton's reluctance exemplified the weight of routine in shaping the format of the Conferences. Anything which occurred more than once became 'customary' – a tendency which stifled initiative. Despite years to prepare, and many official reports being circulated, neither host nor visitor anticipated the rapid growth of Commonwealth membership. A 1960 report optimistically hoped that additions would be limited to just three before 1970, which it noted would keep the Conference smaller than the

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

¹⁵² Clark to MacDonald, February 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

¹⁵³ Hilton Poynton to Alexander Clutterbuck, 21 March 1960, in 'The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference 1960, Briefing General Arrangements', TNA CO 1032/362.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

British Cabinet.¹⁵⁵ At times serious questions about decolonisation seemed to be unduly affected by thoughts of how it would alter the composition of the club. Macmillan invoked London clubland when prevaricating over membership for Cyprus, asking was the Commonwealth going to be ‘The RAC or Boodles?’¹⁵⁶ Macmillan’s eventual successor, Lord Home, sulked that ‘if Cyprus was admitted to full membership, then all the other tiddlers would demand this treatment’.¹⁵⁷

Macmillan and Home’s emphasis on the number of members reflected the fact that the Conference relied on an intimate Cabinet-like feel to keep topics on the table. By convention, if an issue was not unanimously acceptable as a subject of debate it was excised from the agenda. The unanimity rule had long been undermined by the use of informal meetings to discuss defence and other topics, but their use had limits. Macmillan quipped that ‘more dinners and fewer meetings’ could be a solution to the increase in numbers, but a wholesale abandonment of plenary sessions would have left the Conferences more vulnerable to claims that they were well-catered junkets rather than serious summits.¹⁵⁸ Thus so long as plenary sessions continued, overall numbers were important as there was no way to outwardly differentiate between members. As the Conference format gave each leader equal time to speak, usually in order of national independence, once the new Commonwealth had a majority it would have the bulk of speaking time and the closing speeches on each issue. As the Conferences had no independent secretariat and no ballots, influence could not be weighted by financial contributions or population size. In *The Anglo-African Commonwealth*, Ali Mazrui argued that numerical superiority was paramount, as the Conference format tended to ‘yield advantage to the side with more voices’.¹⁵⁹ For as long as the new members were in the minority, they could be treated as

¹⁵⁵ Bligh minute, PREM 11/3649, in Madden (ed.), *Dependencies since 1948*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁶ Note for the Record, 13 July 1960, TNA PREM 11/3649, in McIntyre, *The Britannic Vision*, p. 306.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Bligh minute, PREM 11/3649, in Madden (ed.), *Dependencies since 1948*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁹ Ali Mazrui, *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Friction and Cultural Fusion* (Oxford, 1967), p. 36.

‘honorary Englishmen’; especially as many of them were British educated. Nehru himself once said ‘I am the last Englishman to rule India’.¹⁶⁰ In his memoirs Joe Garner recalled that: ‘Nehru fitted naturally into a prime ministers’ meeting. So did his Asian colleagues, Liaquat Ali Khan from Pakistan and Senanayake from Ceylon, both of whom proved very acceptable members of the Club’.¹⁶¹ The implication was that later additions from Africa were less clubbable, or as Mazrui put it: ‘The African members are more influential precisely because they are the least anglicised. They have been deemed to be in greater need of tolerant indulgence from the others than was needed by the prime minister of Jamaica or of India’.¹⁶² Therefore, it could be argued the Conferences had a predictable trajectory: from private reserve while Britain and the old dominions predominated, to public volatility as soon as the new Commonwealth outnumbered the old. Such a narrative could cite South African withdrawal at the 1961 Conference – the first at which the new Commonwealth had a majority. The difficulty with the ‘honorary Englishman’ theory is that it portrays the Asian prime ministers as complaisant when they also challenged norms. In addition to the partial boycott made by Ali Khan in 1951, he broke another convention that year by giving a press conference detailing the contents of the informal session on Kashmir.¹⁶³ In 1957 the Indian representative at the UN Krishna Menon went further, reading out in full Nehru’s notes on the 1951 informal session on Kashmir in a meeting of the UN General Assembly, one of the clearest breaches of the supposed secrecy of the Prime Ministers’ Conferences.¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, if the Asian prime ministers were so assimilated as to be ‘honorary Englishmen’, it is difficult to explain why they then ‘reverted’ and became leaders in what was described as

¹⁶⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, *Name-Dropping: From F.D.R. On* (Boston, 2001), p. 132.

¹⁶¹ Garner, *Commonwealth Office*, p. 297.

¹⁶² Mazrui, *Anglo-African Commonwealth*, p. 39.

¹⁶³ K. Raman Pillai, *The Political Triangle: Pakistan, India and Britain* (New Delhi, 1970), p. 36.

¹⁶⁴ S.C. Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth* (Agra, 1970), p. 68; Pierson Dixon, British Permanent Representative to the UN, to Foreign Office, 28 January 1957, TNA FO 371/129767.

the 'Afro-Asian' grouping within the Commonwealth.¹⁶⁵ African countries never had a majority in their own right at any of the Conferences, and it was Asian leaders who prompted the biggest changes at the 1960 Conference. The first change was the participation of Pakistani President Mohammad Ayub Khan. Ayub himself was perfectly clubbable. *The Observer* once characterised him as giving the impression of a 'British brigadier deeply planted', and the military coup which brought him to power was broadly accepted by the West as creating a more stable regime.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, it was the first break from the commonality of the Westminster system. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a grouping which had had some of its lengthiest debates over royal titles and the precedence of high commissioners, it was the change in terminology to president which appeared more distressing than the undemocratic basis of the title. Australian High Commissioner to Pakistan Roden Cutler had his credentials letter rejected by Ayub in 1958 'on the basis that he, as a president, could not correspond with the prime minister of another country'.¹⁶⁷ A year later Ayub seemed to have realised that such a protocol could exclude him from the Prime Ministers' Conference, so he told the press 'he supposed he was a prime minister too' and publicly confirmed his intention to travel to London.¹⁶⁸ Privately, he hoped that the clubbish nature of the Conferences would enable the prime ministers to overlook his military rule. He told Cutler 'good chaps like your Prime Minister and Diefenbaker have always understood our problem and I am sure that others are beginning to appreciate the fact that we are sincere in our intentions'.¹⁶⁹ Agreeing to Ayub's participation was a common-sense measure – it would have diminished the value of discussion to deny a place to a head of government who was willing to attend – but doing so on a 'good chap' basis set a poor precedent for subsequent countries which underwent coups and suspended constitutions. The

¹⁶⁵ 'Canada's Pearson Impresses Afro-Asians', *Dominion Post*, 16 July 1964.

¹⁶⁶ *The Observer*, 12 July 1964 in Holyoake Papers, NLNZ MS-1814-283/6.

¹⁶⁷ A.R. Cutler to Department of External Affairs, 25 November 1959, NAA A1838 899/1/38.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ J.E. Oldham, 'Prime Ministers' Conference 1960: Attendance of Field-Marshal Ayub Khan', 10 December 1959, NAA A1838 899/1/38.

Commonwealth did not secure any undertakings on a return to civilian rule in Pakistan, making it difficult for it to exclude or even admonish undemocratic regimes in the future.

While Pakistan brought the biggest constitutional change to the 1960 Conference, it was Malaya – usually the most pro-Western of the new Commonwealth members, due to its defence needs – which was the most disruptive at the Conference itself.¹⁷⁰ At the opening session of the 1960 Conference Tunku Abdul Rahman declared he ‘had come from parliament directly, armed with a resolution which compelled him to speak at this Conference, all parties in Malaya were united in giving him a mandate to take up the question of apartheid’.¹⁷¹ This was a real challenge to the unanimity rule. The agenda would become unworkable if individual members claimed to be bound by their parliaments to raise issues. It would have been anathema to the likes of Mackenzie King for one parliament to dictate topics to others. The response to the Tunku was the usual tactic of proposing informal meetings. Macmillan suggested that ‘the subject would be better not taken in plenary for the reason that it could not be discussed intimately. Although there were only seven countries, over fifty people were in the room and the meeting was of a different character from a cabinet meeting’.¹⁷² This illustrated how, as host, Britain could inflate the distinction between formal and informal meetings by controlling the numbers present at the formal sessions. More fundamentally, the Tunku’s apparent outburst in the opening session had been preapproved by Macmillan, who recorded in a note for file that the Tunku:

seems willing to fall in with the plan proposed for opening the conference tomorrow. He will make some reference to the multi-racial problem in connection with South Africa in his reply to my speech of welcome. This will satisfy him. He is prepared to accept the procedural proposal I intend to put forward ... the discussion of the matter between Mr. Louw and such prime ministers as care to enter into any talk with him, probably in a number of small groups. I outlined this plan to Mr. Nehru at luncheon, and he also seems willing to fall in with it.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ W. Scott Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy 1957-1966* (Princeton, 1969), p. 96.

¹⁷¹ Opening Session, 3 May 1960, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-122.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Note by the Prime Minister, 2 May 1960, TNA PREM 11/2909.

The only part of the plan which does not seem to have been premeditated was the Tunku's request that his opening speech be sent to Malaya for publication; Macmillan irritably replied that 'this would be very tiresome'.¹⁷⁴ The prepared nature of the Tunku's criticism does not mean that his opposition to apartheid was insincere, but it does illustrate how members of the club were aware of the need to work within the Conference structure to secure the type of discussion they actually wanted. Similarly, South Africa knew that agreeing to informal meetings would allow it to save face and tell its domestic audience that the topic was not discussed in plenary session, even though the differences between plenary and informal sessions were marginal. Louw said he would meet informally with groups of up to six prime ministers; a very slight distinction when only eight prime ministers (excluding Welensky of Rhodesia and Nyasaland) were present.¹⁷⁵

The 1960 Conference was characterised by stratagems to avoid a definitive answer on South African membership as a republic. Given that the scheme to hold informal meetings had been arranged beforehand, it was disingenuous for Macmillan to pronounce that prime ministers should hold informal discussions upstairs 'as the spirit moved them' when he had already organised for Louw 'to take two or three chaps at a time to the withdrawing rooms which had been provided'.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, at the first plenary session Louw stated that his autonomy was limited because Verwoerd was still recovering from an assassination attempt and 'was not able to sit up and take an interest in affairs'.¹⁷⁷ Yet by the end of the Conference ten days later, Verwoerd was dictating terms for the communiqué to Louw via telephone.¹⁷⁸ The fact the South African republic referendum had not yet been held gave leaders a convenient excuse to defer a

¹⁷⁴ Opening Session, 3 May 1960, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-122.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Arthur Menzies, Canadian Acting High Commissioner to Malaya, to Department of External Affairs, 24 June 1960, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1960', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40..

decision, although Louw still sought pre-emptive approval: 'If it would remove any anxieties that a decision now might influence the referendum, he was prepared to give an assurance that the South African government would not disclose before the referendum that it had received the agreement of the other Commonwealth governments'.¹⁷⁹ Given that the main impediment to agreement was the arbitrary and racialist nature of the South African government, it was surely stretching the 'good chap' nature of the prime ministers to expect them to accept the word of that same government. Despite discussion being excised from plenary sessions, apartheid permeated the 1960 Conference. Menzies wrote that 'South Africa was never more than just under the surface. Even though all of our dark colleagues were showing great moderation, tact and also skill in the way they spoke to Louw ... one or two were not above a sly barb every so often'.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps Menzies' 'dark colleagues' could afford to be both moderate and make sly barbs towards South Africa given that they knew numbers would increasingly be on their side. Nigeria was only five months away from independence. Nkrumah had vetoed Nigerian participation in the 1960 Conference, but prime minister-in-waiting Balewa was invited to some of the social functions.¹⁸¹ This was opportunity enough for Balewa to make his views on South African membership clear, stating 'what is the use of drawing up high-sounding rules for a club, unless other members are able to expel anybody who breaks them?'.¹⁸²

The non-apartheid agenda items in 1960 were high-sounding but diversionary. A brief on Irish membership was prepared by the CRO, as if the return of one of the original members could compensate for a potential South African departure. The catalyst for the brief was a thin rumour that Irish ministers would consider a return to the Commonwealth, but only in exchange for a

¹⁷⁹ Opening Session, 3 May 1960, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-122.

¹⁸⁰ Menzies to McEwen, 15 May 1960, Personal Papers of Prime Minister McEwen, NAA M58 193.

¹⁸¹ Press cutting, 'Plan for an African Union; Ghana Ready to Give up Sovereignty', 8 January 1960, PRAAD RG 17/1/202.

¹⁸² Trevor Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman: Abubakar from the Black Rock* (London, 1991), p. 428.

united Ireland, which would have been politically impractical.¹⁸³ The 1960 Conference also heard a Ceylonese proposal for a Commonwealth court, which would arbitrate in intra-Commonwealth disputes as well as replace the Privy Council as final court of appeal for those countries which still used it.¹⁸⁴ Such an initiative would have been a valuable sign of unity, but was never likely to be adopted given the inability of the Commonwealth to settle even its smallest internal disputes, such as the ownership of the India Office Library, which had been contested by Britain, India and Pakistan since 1947. A sideline meeting at the 1960 Conference debated the matter, with Nehru arguing that the Indian claim was ‘cast iron’ and his government ‘would be prepared to see the library remain in London for the time being, but without any prejudice as to the long term future’.¹⁸⁵ Britain maintained its claim to the library, but stated it would consider an independent trust with representatives of all three governments. A proposal for the dispute to be adjudicated by three justices drawn from the judicial committee of the Privy Council was accepted, but even then the countries could not agree whether English or Indian law should apply. If consensus could not be reached at the prime ministerial level on historical matters, it is hard to envisage how the Commonwealth could handle contemporary issues. Hence the 1960 agenda was constructed to evade contestable topics. Nehru suggested a discussion on Algeria would be useful, but the CRO official tasked with drawing up the annotated agenda observed:

I am sure we would not want this ... Algeria could presumably be discussed under ‘the Middle East’ as a matter which profoundly affects opinion in the Arab world ... alternatively item IV(iii) could be re-defined, by omitting the words ‘south of the Sahara; to cover dependent territories anywhere in Africa (although strictly speaking Algeria is not a French dependency but part of metropolitan France).¹⁸⁶

Such pedantry suggests the agenda was retreating into diplomatic legalese, looking for a loophole to avoid the topic. A similar manoeuvre was evident in the title of the item on British

¹⁸³ Ireland brief, 17 March 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

¹⁸⁴ M.S. Rajan, *The Post-War Transformation of the Commonwealth* (London, 1963), p. 62.

¹⁸⁵ India Office Library brief, 12 May 1960, TNA CAB 133/305.

¹⁸⁶ N. Aspin, ‘Prime Ministers’ Meeting Annotated Agenda’, 17 March 1960, TNA DO 35/9694.

decolonisation in Africa, with one CRO file noting ‘The title of the ‘A’ brief has been changed to “non-self-governing United Kingdom territories” in Africa in the hope of excluding discussions of the Federation or Southern Rhodesia’, although it was conceded that ‘this hope is very likely to be in vain’.¹⁸⁷

Crafty agenda titles could be no more than a short term strategy, and ran the risk of destroying the semblance of free-form discussion. Nash arrived at the 1960 Conference with eighty pounds of documents in his luggage, making a mockery of Menzies’ claim in the same year that the Conferences had no set agenda.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, if questions were settled by the exchange of briefs and annotated agendas beforehand, prime ministers would be less interested in attending. The CRO had difficulty persuading Ayub Khan not to schedule a state visit to West Germany during the second half of the 1960 Conference, when Nigerian membership and Ghanaian republicanism were to be discussed. The British High Commission in Karachi was instructed to invoke custom and remind the Pakistanis that ‘there has been no previous instance at Prime Ministers’ Meetings of any Prime Minister or head of delegation being absent when decisions of this nature were taken’.¹⁸⁹ Perhaps aware that custom was no longer convincing in itself, an argument about public appearance was added: ‘Is there not also some risk, despite the fact that President’s absence would be officially attributed to a state visit elsewhere, to speculation arising to some disagreement with e.g. Mr. Nehru which led him to leave the meeting before its conclusion?’.¹⁹⁰ While Ayub was eventually convinced to defer the state visit, it added to the sense that the 1960 Conference did little more than ‘hold the line’ before a second round debate on South Africa in 1961. The CRO’s argument that custom required membership questions to

¹⁸⁷ Letter to Kirkness, 12 April 1960, TNA DO 35/7642.

¹⁸⁸ Canadian High Commission, Wellington, to Department of External Affairs, 12 April 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40; Menzies, *Smuts Memorial Lecture: The Changing Commonwealth* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 18.

¹⁸⁹ CRO to British High Commission Karachi, 4 March 1960, TNA CO 1032/362.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

be settled by heads of government alone heightened the tension at the 1961 Conference, which all leaders agreed to attend. Thus no delegation could buy time by referring the decision to an absent leader. The 1961 Conference proved to be the last at which no country was represented by a deputy. The speeches made regarding South African membership will be examined in chapter four, so this chapter will confine itself to examining how South Africa's departure was shaped by the structure of the 1961 Conference. The fact that South Africa withdrew rather than was expelled was itself an indication that the Conferences retained their sense of 'non-diplomacy'; there was no requirement for a ballot and no resolution which needed to be passed. There was also something indicative of the intrinsic Britishness of the Conferences that the sign that South African withdrawal was definitive was the fact that Macmillan punctuated the silence at the end of debate by suggesting a tea break, rather than proposing another round of talks.¹⁹¹

The 1961 Conference had broken with tradition before it even started by convening in Lancaster House rather than No. 10. Visiting delegations would no longer gather around the cabinet table. This was a consequence of the major refurbishment of Downing Street during 1960-63 rather than a step away from British predominance, but it was notable that the Conferences did not join Macmillan in decamping to Admiralty House, where he lived and held Cabinet meetings.¹⁹² Admiralty House was markedly more spacious than No. 10 and could have accommodated the prime ministers, even with the new additions of Cyprus and Nigeria. Therefore, the move to the ornate Lancaster House, an imposing mansion used for international summits since the end of the Second World War, was a significant step away from 'non-diplomacy' and the familial atmosphere of Downing Street. Norman Brook conceded that Lancaster House was associated with 'formal international meetings' and that a special effort would have to be made to preserve the 'traditional informality' of the Commonwealth

¹⁹¹ Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa Since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 269.

¹⁹² Alistair Horne, *Macmillan: The Official Biography* (London, 2008), p. 266.

Conferences.¹⁹³ The move was also a concession to South Africa. Louw had lobbied for the 1960 Conference to be held away from No. 10 as it had ‘disadvantages when it came to making unofficial and private contact with other Commonwealth representatives. There were no rooms for example where he could have a private talk to Nkrumah’.¹⁹⁴ It became clear that Louw’s lunch with Nkrumah, lauded in 1957 as a conciliatory gesture, had been born of necessity: ‘difficulties about either of them visiting the other’s office had ended by taking Nkrumah out to lunch’.¹⁹⁵ Meeting in Lancaster House provided room for private meetings and kept negotiations ‘in house’ as far as possible.¹⁹⁶ On the other hand, it made differentiation between members more blatant; when informal defence meetings were held at No. 10, it was easy to claim that they were by the personal invitation of the British prime minister. When held at Lancaster House, the ‘limited discussions’ on defence confined to Britain, Australia and New Zealand had the air of a two-tier Commonwealth.¹⁹⁷ In addition to changing location, Britain and Canada espoused modifications to structure of the talks. Diefenbaker, who was prevaricating on South African membership and had proposed a host of stalling tactics such as a Commonwealth charter, suggested that prime ministers speak in reverse seniority order, in the ‘manner of military courts-martial’.¹⁹⁸ With Macmillan serving as chair and speaking first, this would leave Diefenbaker to last. The Canadian aim was to avoid making a decision at all, hoping that: ‘If none of the non-whites spoke in favour of South Africa’s exclusion, the white members would be able with a clear conscience to acquiesce in South Africa’s continued membership’.¹⁹⁹ Reversing the speaking order may have been too blatant, but Macmillan tried a similar gambit by suggesting that on the question of expulsion a member a ‘reversed unanimity

¹⁹³ Meeting in Sir Norman Brook’s Room, 27 January 1961, TNA CAB 133/258.

¹⁹⁴ British High Commission, South Africa, to CRO, 8 March 1960, TNA CO 1032/362.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Meeting in Sir Norman Brook’s Room, 27 January 1961, TNA CAB 133/258.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers: Limited Discussions’, Lancaster House, 16 March 1961, ANZ ABFK 19754/93, PM 43/3/3.

¹⁹⁸ ‘South Africa Memorandum for File’, 10 February 1961, ‘Commonwealth - London’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 4, file 10, R3969-602-2-E.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

rule' applied; just as each prime minister had to agree to accept a new member, a country could not be expelled so long as one prime minister supported it.²⁰⁰ While this aligned with the Commonwealth's traditional aversion to majority ballots, it also tried to set the bar for expulsion unreasonably high, perhaps in the hope that Menzies or Holyoake would hold out for South African retention and take the opprobrium on behalf of Britain.

A change from the customary venue and attempts to invert the customary speaker order may appear trivial, but the reason South African membership was inscribed on the formal agenda in the first place was because of the custom that countries had to reapply for membership if becoming a republic. The convention rested on the wording of the 1949 London Declaration in which India accepted the monarch as Head of the Commonwealth, and other members accepted India's continued membership. The London Declaration became an established convention because Pakistan insisted that a footnote be added to the minutes of the 1949 Conference, stating that future applications for republican membership would be treated in the same way.²⁰¹ This could be interpreted two ways: South Africa took it as describing the outcome, and that acceptance as a republic was a *fait accompli*; whereas the new Commonwealth read it as outlining the process, meaning South Africa formally had to reapply. Either way, the application had to be put to the Conference in plenary session and a decision distilled into a communiqué or declaration. This illustrated the power of precedent in the absence of a constitution: a decision made in 1949 became a binding principle up until 1997 when the Commonwealth finally published its criteria for membership in the Edinburgh Declaration.²⁰² The precept was not just hypothetical. The memberships of Fiji and Mauritius were deemed to have lapsed in 1987 and 1992 respectively when they declared republics as a result of coups

²⁰⁰ 'Note for the Record, Meeting with Verwoerd at 4:30p.m.', 7 March 1961, TNA PREM 11/3217.

²⁰¹ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a Difference: The Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner 1880-2006* (Leiden, 2007), p. 130.

²⁰² Alison Duxbury, 'Fracture in the Family: Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth', *Oxford University Commonwealth Law Journal*, 4:1 (2004), p. 105.

whereas countries which had coups whilst already republics, such as Nigeria and Ghana in 1966, were able to continue as members.²⁰³ The custom also explained the manner in which South Africa departed the Commonwealth. There was no walkout and no expulsion. South Africa simply withdrew its application for continued membership. It remained a member until the day the republic was proclaimed and Verwoerd participated in the remainder of the 1961 Conference. It was indicative of the uniqueness of the Conferences amongst international forums that a country could signal its withdraw one day and turn up for discussion on disarmament the next.²⁰⁴

South Africa's departure at the 1961 Conference prompted a second wave of Commonwealth multiracial idealism. Just as the acceptance of India in 1949 secured Asian participation in a forum once confined to white dominions, the withdrawal of South Africa in 1961 ensured that new nations were comfortable joining the Commonwealth. For instance, in 1961 Tanganyika was on the cusp of independence. Chief Minister Julius Nyerere wrote an article for the *Observer* on the eve of the 1961 Conference which made the options clear: 'Commonwealth Choice: South Africa or us'.²⁰⁵ When his lobbying proved successful, Nyerere was jubilant. He declared March 15 to be Tanganyika's new Commonwealth Day.²⁰⁶ Yet as this chapter has shown, there was surprisingly little that was 'new' about the Commonwealth Conferences which Nyerere was now eager to join. The two major membership decisions of the period – Indian acceptance in 1949 and South African withdrawal in 1961 – loom large in Commonwealth historiography. This thesis argues this is because they were outliers; being sharp, decisive and irreversible moments in a narrative of surprisingly gradual change. The clubbish construct meant that attendance at the Conference by new Commonwealth members was seen in itself as a marker

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁰⁴ Thirteenth meeting, 16 March 1961, TNA DO 161/156.

²⁰⁵ Shridath Ramphal, 'The Whole Earth for his Nation', in Colin Legum and Geoffrey Mmari (eds), *Mwalimu: The Influence of Nyerere* (Oxford, 1995), p. 148.

²⁰⁶ Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman*, p. 500.

of independence. The symbolic import of Asian and African leaders, many former political prisoners, being accepted into the former white man's club only worked if some of the imperial apparatus remained in place. Thus it was important that the Conferences met in historic No. 10 for as long as possible, rather a sleek modern building; it symbolised former dependencies entering sanctums which had formerly been denied to them. It made sense for the Conferences to trade on their history as the longest-established international forum as they could not compete with the UN for breadth or with new regional organisations such as the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) for potential. However, this left the Commonwealth vulnerable when Britain itself sought membership of a regional organisation, the EEC. For Britain, the Conferences had been predicated on transcending continental boundaries and preserving a 'world role'; now it had to convince Europe that it was continental enough.

Chapter Three:

‘All the weapons of standard international diplomacy’:

The Conferences 1962-1969

‘Perhaps in the perspective of history, this 1962 London conference will be seen as the moment when the Commonwealth nations abandoned the fading fiction of partnership – in economic affairs – and recognised the brutal fact that they had become sovereign rivals’.¹

Freed from a preoccupation with the composition of its membership, the 1962 Conference should have heralded a new era of constructive debate in the Commonwealth. In 1961, Britain’s desire to keep delegations small while South Africa was being debated caused it to drop any reference to economic affairs from the agenda, lest it ‘prompt all the prime ministers to bring economic advisers with them’.² In contrast, the 1962 Conference was almost exclusively on an economic issue, although it was also a membership question of a sort: Britain’s application to join the EEC. On face value, this was a decision solely for Britain, but one of the consequences of its lingering leadership of the Commonwealth was that its policies were subject to far greater scrutiny from visiting leaders than they would accept in their own affairs. Such scrutiny was warranted, however, given that Britain remained the banker of the sterling area, and was negotiating away its Commonwealth preferences in exchange for entry into Europe. Furthermore, Britain planned to bring most of its remaining colonial territories into the common market through associate status and also espoused associate status for much of the Afro-Caribbean Commonwealth. Therefore, Britain’s common market application was a genuine multilateral concern. The complexity of the topic made the 1962 Conference the most detailed and structured since the Imperial Conferences. Unfortunately, it also prompted one of

¹ ‘Premiers await a final showdown - Chance of two dissenting communiques on EEC’, *Guardian*, 19 September 1962.

² ‘Proposed agenda and briefing programme’, 25 January 1961, TNA CAB 133/258.

the most divisive meetings in Commonwealth history. Just when the Commonwealth had appeared to secure its future as a multiracial grouping, a new 'life or death' issue had emerged – New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Jack Marshall declared before his arrival at the 1962 Conference that British entry into the EEC without adequate safeguards for Commonwealth access would be a 'suspended sentence of death'.³ Yet even if Britain's common market membership was a life or death issue, it could not be settled by a simple 'in or out' resolution. While questions of Commonwealth membership effectively had yes or no answers and could be best resolved by emphasising the intimacy of the Conferences and excluding advisors, the minutiae of tariff negotiations required the presence of additional ministers and a more technical approach. This could have been a positive for the Commonwealth – a substantive topic to debate that did not centre on race. Yet the emotive import of Britain appearing to disclaim its ties with former colonies in favour of Europe could not be ignored. Equally, to treat the issue dispassionately and concentrate on the diminution of Commonwealth preferences was to undermine the uniqueness of the grouping. The focus on profit and loss for each member explained why the 1962 Conference saw what the *Guardian* described as 'the frank acceptance that all the weapons of standard international diplomacy had to be brought into play, the inspired report, the leaked text, the backstage quid pro quo'. The first Conference without South Africa was a turning point, but not for the principled reasons hoped for after the 1961 decision; nations which had reaffirmed the multiracial character of the Commonwealth were shaken by Britain's pursuit of membership in the EEC, a grouping which Ayub Khan characterised as another 'white man's club'.⁴

While the Commonwealth had held economic conferences before, these were typically confined to finance ministers. The clearest precedent for prime ministerial involvement was the 1932

³ V.K. Ahuja, Acting Indian High Commissioner to New Zealand, 'Political report June 1962', 4 July 1962, NAI HI/6(85)/62.

⁴ A.M. Abraham, 'A London Letter', *Thought* (New Delhi), 22 September 1962, p. 16.

Imperial Conference in Ottawa, which had established imperial preference as a response to the Great Depression and the end of the gold standard.⁵ Large delegations brokered a detailed deal to create a trading bloc – a historic development for an Empire which had been ostensibly assembled to facilitate free trade. Thirty years later, delegations gathered to reverse this process. Even though many Commonwealth preferences had already been dismantled, and some others survived until Britain's eventual entry into the EEC in 1973 or shortly thereafter, the 1962 Conference was nonetheless the beginning of the end. Visiting delegations sought to enumerate their objections while Britain aimed to bind itself as little as possible. These opposing objectives demanded a more elaborate structure than the usual divide between plenary and informal sessions. Subcommittees were established to cover tropical products, temperate foodstuffs, raw materials and low-cost manufactures.⁶ Visiting prime ministers brought larger delegations than usual; most were assisted by their treasurers and trade ministers.⁷ Some also brought their opposition leaders, underscoring how momentous Britain's common market application was.⁸ No country had brought opposition leaders to London before, even though decisions on India and South Africa were equally worthy of bipartisanship. Similarly, the convention that colonies did not attend the Prime Ministers' Conference before becoming fully independent was broken, albeit through the trope of designating their leaders as advisors to the Colonial Secretary.⁹ Despite this subordinate status, colonial leaders participated fully in the subcommittees.¹⁰ Chief Ministers from Barbados, British Guiana, Kenya, Malta, Mauritius, Singapore and Uganda attended as well as an official from Hong Kong.¹¹ Plenary sessions commenced with the usual review of international affairs, but this was more for the sake of following convention. Debate

⁵ Jim Tomlinson, 'The Empire/Commonwealth in British Economic Thinking and Policy', in Andrew Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2012), p. 219.

⁶ Norman Brook, 'Common Market: Handling of the Discussions', 21 August 1961, TNA PREM 11/3660.

⁷ Norman Brook to Macmillan, 5 September 1962, *ibid.*

⁸ Eric Williams, 'The future of the West Indies and Guyana: Address at Queen's College, Georgetown, Guyana', 13 March 1963, in 'Eric Williams/PNM Collections', National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago (NATT).

⁹ T.J. Bligh, 'Colonial Representation at Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting', 18 May 1962, TNA PREM 11/3660.

¹⁰ Norman Brook, 'Common Market: Handling of the Discussions', 21 August 1961, *ibid.*

¹¹ 'Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, Draft Communiqué for 10th September', *ibid.*

soon turned to whether, in Menzies' words, the Commonwealth could give its 'benediction' to Britain's application.¹² After Macmillan's opening remarks, Ted Heath, who had been tasked with leading negotiations with the EEC, gave a ninety-minute address detailing the concessions already extracted from Europe and commending the package as the best possible.¹³ The lengthy speech, similar in style to introducing and commending a bill to parliament, prompted adversarial responses. The cabinet-style discussions which had hitherto characterised the Conferences gave way to a parliamentary-style procedure. Leaders took turns to give an initial reaction to the proposal, followed by a detailed speech later in the week, which were dubbed 'second reading speeches'.¹⁴ These were much longer than anticipated; Eric Williams threw out the Conference schedule by giving an eighty minute speech, even though he was in favour of British entry.¹⁵ The parliamentary feel of the Conference was exacerbated by the location. Marlborough House replaced Lancaster House as the venue, and each delegation was given an office within the building for the first time.¹⁶ These private offices, combined with the subcommittees meeting around the building, must have made the atmosphere more akin to Parliament than No. 10.

When the second reading speeches had concluded, the dismay of the Commonwealth was clear. Only Cyprus, Malaya and Trinidad and Tobago were prepared to accept British entry.¹⁷ The old Commonwealth led the criticism of the common market plan. Disagreement even extended into other issues, with the Canadian delegation dissenting from the British line on the Congo in

¹² Handwritten notes, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference', Marshall Papers, NLNZ MS-1403-155/3.

¹³ Travel Letter, 10 September 1962, Holt Papers, NAA M2608/18.

¹⁴ Memorandum of conversations with Menzies and Holyoake', 7 September 1962, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference - press clippings', LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, R3969-624-1-E.

¹⁵ Travel Letter, 12 September 1962, Holt Papers, NAA M2608/18.

¹⁶ 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference Arrangements', 8 September 1962, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/128, LONB 53/15/5B.

¹⁷ 1962 Final Communiqué, *The Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 78.

favour of the African view.¹⁸ The Canadians also raised the issue of Commonwealth consultation at the UN, arguing that the chairmanship of the informal Commonwealth caucus should rotate between members. Canadian External Affairs Minister Howard Green noted Britain was always chairman at meetings in New York and asked whether it was time ‘for this tradition to wither away’.¹⁹ The combative atmosphere was not necessarily a bad thing. A Ghanaian delegate told the *Guardian* ‘Today was the Commonwealth’s finest hour. Frank speeches, real independence of expression. Only Britain stood alone’.²⁰ The last sentence was the most salient. Britain could usually fall back on the unstinting support of the antipodes; this time Australia and New Zealand were amongst the most adversely affected countries. With South African withdrawal, Britain was now the country ‘in the dock’ at each Conference. For British officials, the hostile reaction the common market plan received in 1962 was more distressing than the failure to avoid South Africa’s withdrawal the previous year. As in 1949, Britain had sent envoys out to Commonwealth capitals to persuade leaders of the merits of the British line before they arrived for the Conference. While this helped persuade the dominions to drop their objections to Indian membership in 1949, in 1962 the visits of Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys prompted the resistance to the British case to commence. Basil Robinson noted that before Sandys reached Ottawa, Diefenbaker received a message from Menzies ‘helpfully reporting the arguments the Australians had used in speaking to Sandys’.²¹ Similarly, New Zealand officials were sceptical of Britain’s decision to convene the Conference before negotiations with Brussels had concluded, thus denying the Commonwealth an ‘in/out’ decision on the package of concessions:

The holding of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting during a pause in the negotiations offers the British government an opportunity to avoid, or at least postpone, giving the Prime Ministers an opportunity to “gang up” against the Common Market.

¹⁸ ‘Premiers await a final showdown: Chance of two dissenting communiqués on EEC’, *The Guardian*, 19 September 1962, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - press clippings’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, R3969-624-1-E.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ H. Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker’s World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto, 1989), p. 214.

Clearly they are taking a calculated risk that at this incomplete stage in the negotiations no one Prime Minister would be willing to take the responsibility of flatly opposing British entry, and that the interest of the Commonwealth countries are too diverse for them to be able to agree on a policy of joint opposition.²²

New Zealand's supposition was right. The final communiqué conceded that 'responsibility for the final decision would rest with the British Government' but the reluctance of Commonwealth was laid bare.²³ Ultimately, only French President Charles de Gaulle could veto the British application, enabling Commonwealth preferences linger on for another decade, but the damage had been done. The 1962 Conference had been civil and comprehensive, but it made manifest the British Government's desire to loosen Commonwealth bonds and draw closer to Europe.

The style of debate the common market issue had engendered – subcommittee meetings with additional ministers and plenary sessions with multiple rounds of speeches – made the Prime Ministers' Conferences into a more typical international summit. The collegiality cultivated at earlier meetings was difficult to maintain when each country had to guard its balance of trade against the possibility of Britain imposing a common European tariff. Even though Britain's application to join the common market stalled in 1963, the attempt itself was enough to prompt an accelerated 'normalisation' of Commonwealth affairs. This 'normalisation' may explain why the anomaly of Rhodesian attendance was ended before the next Conference in July 1964, although in keeping with Commonwealth custom, there was a technicality which could be used to justify the change: the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. As it had received personal invitations to Conferences before the formation of the Federation, Southern Rhodesia was justified in arguing that the invitation reverted to it upon the dissolution of the

²² New Zealand High Commission London, 'British attitude towards entry into Common Market', 4 September 1962, Marshall Papers, NLNZ MS-1403-155/3.

²³ 1962 Final Communiqué, *The Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 78.

Federation.²⁴ However, the consensus of opinion amongst the Commonwealth was against this. This was almost inevitable; as early as 1959 Nkrumah had argued the presence of the Federation made it difficult to convince other African nations, especially former French colonies, that a country could be fully sovereign and remain a member of the Commonwealth.²⁵ The focus on South Africa up until 1961, and the positive publicity the Commonwealth received from its withdrawal, arguably staved off a confrontation on Rhodesian participation until the end of the Federation. British Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home had just commenced consulting the Commonwealth on the issue in April 1964 when Ian Smith dislodged Winston Field as Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister: a personnel change which made the retention of the Rhodesian personal invitation even more unpalatable for new Commonwealth leaders.²⁶ In June 1964 Douglas-Home wrote to Smith informing him that future Conferences would be restricted to fully independent states. Douglas-Home proposed Smith come to London for informal talks on either side of the Conference, but Smith was too proud to accept this.²⁷ While unsurprising, the withdrawal of the Southern Rhodesian invitation nonetheless marked the first time a country had been excluded from the Prime Ministers' Conferences via correspondence rather than meeting in person. British officials may have felt that excluding Smith was a sufficient censure of his government, as they initially rebuffed calls to inscribe Southern Rhodesia on the Conference agenda. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee deemed that discussion of Southern Rhodesia could come under the item 'Other threats to international peace and stability'.²⁸ It was evasive to class an intra-Commonwealth concern (or indeed, domestic British concern, given that Southern Rhodesia remained a colony) as an international issue, especially when the topic heading already conceded the point made by many members – that Southern

²⁴ J.R.T. Wood, *So Far and No Further! Rhodesia's Bid for Independence during the Retreat from Empire 1959-1965* (Victoria, B.C., 2005), p. 207.

²⁵ British High Commission, Ghana, to CRO, 19 October 1959, TNA DO 35/7642.

²⁶ Wood, *So Far and No Further!*, p. 207.

²⁷ Douglas-Home to Smith, 5 June 1964, *ibid.*, p. 215.

²⁸ Defence and Overseas Policy Official Committee, 28 April 1964, TNA CAB 133/201.

Rhodesia was a threat to peace. African leaders publicly criticised the attempt to excise Southern Rhodesia from the agenda, although their outrage also included a modicum of self-interest: they wanted Rhodesia to be the first item so their foreign ministers could leave before the end of the Conference to attend the OAU meeting in Addis Ababa.²⁹ Douglas-Home drew on his experience as former Commonwealth Relations Secretary to broker a compromise on the first day of the Conference, ensuring that the usual review of the world situation would remain the first item.³⁰ However, the remainder of the agenda was worryingly inward looking. Other than economic affairs, the other heads of discussion were internal issues: ‘Progress of British territories towards independence and membership of the Commonwealth’ was a fig leaf for debate on Rhodesia and there were two rounds of talks on the vague topic ‘The Commonwealth – The way ahead’.³¹

‘The way ahead’ was a recitation of old proposals for greater Commonwealth unity, such as Ceylon’s long-standing advocacy of a Commonwealth court.³² British officials noted that such a ‘family’ court would be ‘incompatible with the informality which was a cardinal principle of the Commonwealth relationship’, but the need for a ‘striking example of Commonwealth cooperation’ took precedence.³³ Suspicions that any such court would be biased against Britain were mollified by the Lord Chancellor Lord Dilhorne’s mordant view that Commonwealth judges would at least be of ‘higher legal standing than some present members of the international court’.³⁴ If a Commonwealth court again failed to garner enthusiasm, the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee suggested the erection of ad hoc tribunals for the settlement of intra-Commonwealth disputes, which they noted would fulfil a 1930 Imperial Conference

²⁹ K.R.P. Singh, Indian High Commissioner to Uganda, ‘Political report on Uganda for the month of November 1966’, 3 December 1966, NAI HI/1012(63)/66; Record of discussion between Douglas-Home and Obote, 7 July 1964, TNA PREM 11/4633.

³⁰ Second meeting, 8 July 1964, TNA CAB 133/253.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² M.S. Rajan, *Post-War transformation of the Commonwealth*, (London, 1963), p. 62.

³³ Twenty-sixth meeting, 12 June 1964, in TNA CAB 148/1; thirteenth meeting, 5 June 1964, CAB 148/4.

³⁴ Twenty-sixth meeting, 12 June 1964, TNA CAB 148/1.

resolution, illustrating the depth of institutional memory.³⁵ Yet the only old recommendation which was adopted in 1964 came up in passing rather than being carefully prepared by British officials. On the second day of the Conference, Nkrumah mooted the establishment of a ‘central clearing house’ for the Commonwealth.³⁶ This was a perennial idea, extending back to Curtin’s Empire Secretariat plan of 1944, but in 1964 it finally gained traction. In spite of its many antecedents, Nkrumah’s proposal seems to have been largely spontaneous. Frederick Arkhurst, Ghanaian *Charge d’Affaires* at the UN, told the British High Commissioner in Accra that he suspected Nkrumah raised it after finding himself poorly informed at the plenary session the previous day on the Indonesian threat to Malaysia.³⁷ Nevertheless, the acceptance of a central organisation for the Commonwealth marked a further departure from the fraternal ‘non-diplomacy’ of the past, which held that prime ministerial dialogue should not be mediated by bureaucracy. Arkhurst’s supposition that Nkrumah’s clearing house was intended to combat his lack of awareness of Commonwealth issues also illustrated the increased scale of the Commonwealth. At early Conferences, it could be safely assumed that each prime minister would have a working knowledge of the situation in each other Commonwealth country. By 1964 leaders required background briefs on the particulars of eighteen countries, and it was no longer appropriate that the British Cabinet Office be tasked with disseminating such briefs. Furthermore, the quality of discussion could only suffer if the Conferences were used as a platform for leaders to prosecute dilemmas unique to their country, rather than issues which could be addressed collectively. For example, the opening speech of Cypriot Foreign Affairs Minister Spyros Kyprianou at the 1964 Conference was dedicated to denouncing Turkish interference in Cypriot affairs.³⁸ A Commonwealth Secretariat could ensure information on such issues was circulated without diverting the Conferences from topics of wider interest. On the

³⁵ Thirteenth meeting, 5 June 1964, TNA CAB 148/4.

³⁶ Fourth meeting, 9 July 1964, TNA CAB 133/253.

³⁷ Harold Smedley to Garner, TNA DO 195/223.

³⁸ Third meeting, 8 July 1964, TNA CAB 133/253.

other hand, a Secretariat could also become a vehicle for further scrutiny of the old Commonwealth. Ghana had already tried to get Australia's racially discriminatory immigration policy onto the agenda of the 1964 Conference.³⁹ Menzies' response was to inform Ghana that the right of individual members to determine their immigration intake had been settled at the 1918 Imperial Conference, highlighting how the Commonwealth seldom discarded precedents, even when new structures such as the Secretariat were added to the edifice.⁴⁰

While Britain conceded an early plenary session on Rhodesia, it also imposed some behavioural conditions on the 1964 Conference. After impassioned speeches against the common market garnered loud ovations at the 1962 Conference, the administrative arrangements document for the Conference sternly advised that 'the habit that grew up last time of applauding at the end of each speech should be dropped for the future'.⁴¹ Likewise, having accepted the principle of a Commonwealth Secretariat, Britain assumed responsibility for its formation, with Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend chairing the meeting of officials charged with drafting the memorandum of understanding for the approval of the 1965 Conference.⁴² The Commonwealth would at last have a Secretary-General, but with an explicitly secretarial role; the host nation would remain chair of the Conferences. Similarly, the Commonwealth finally had a headquarters in Marlborough House, but this was less of a breakthrough and more of a belated acceptance. The Queen had offered Marlborough House as a Commonwealth centre in 1959, but it had only been partially utilised as offices for the low profile Commonwealth Economic Committee and as a venue for the 1962 and 1964 Prime Ministers' Conferences.⁴³ It had hardly been embraced as a symbol of Commonwealth culture, with Norman Brook expressing horror at any prospect

³⁹ 'Australia's Immigration Policy', CRO brief, June 1964, TNA LAB 8/2990.

⁴⁰ Meeting between Douglas-Home and Menzies, 6 July 1964, TNA PREM 11/4633.

⁴¹ 'Administrative Arrangements', 6 July 1964, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/147, LONB 65/3/1/A.

⁴² Margaret Ball, *The 'Open' Commonwealth* (Durham, N.C., 1971), p. 89.

⁴³ Mohammad Ikramullah, 'The Commonwealth Economic Committee and its Work', *Pakistan Horizon*, 16:1 (1963), p. 20.

of a diverse décor: ‘we certainly do not want to see the house cluttered up with statuary from India or Ghana, or even with modern furniture from Canada or Australia’.⁴⁴ Thus while the secretariat was wholly new, its home was unashamedly imperial, the walls replete with paintings of victory over the Franco-Bavarians at the Battle of Blenheim.⁴⁵ The first act of the June 1965 Conference was almost liege-like, expressing deepest gratitude to the Queen for the use of her royal palace as a headquarters for the Secretariat.⁴⁶ The internal business of the Conference was to appoint the first Commonwealth Secretary-General, and here too Britain was imperious, even advising that the British Prime Minister should officially appoint the Secretary-General.⁴⁷ The prospect of the Conference electing a Secretary-General by majority vote was enough to prompt British officials to make the astonishing suggestion of ‘an interim appointment of a retired British colonial Governor as acting Secretary-General for one year while further attention was given to procedure’.⁴⁸ The appointment of colonial governor would have been such a retrograde step, that the proposal can best be interpreted as a bargaining ploy to push the prime ministers towards selecting an old Commonwealth candidate, albeit not a Briton: Canadian civil servant Arnold Smith. More importantly, the Conference chose Smith by consensus rather than a vote; the avoidance of ballots being one of the most vaunted of Commonwealth conventions. Yet as Papadopoulos notes, the memorandum on the Secretary-General’s functions was markedly more detailed and prescriptive than that of the Secretary-General in the UN charter – undermining the notion that the Commonwealth was a uniquely informal grouping.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Brook to Macmillan, 29 January 1959, TNA PREM 11/4102, in Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2014), p. 125.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Barrington, *Envoy: A Diplomatic Journey* (London, 2013), p. 87.

⁴⁶ First meeting, 17 June 1965, TNA CAB 133/254.

⁴⁷ Arnold Smith and Clyde Sanger, *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (London, 1983), p. 17, in Stuart Mole, ‘From Smith to Sharma: The Role of the Secretary-General’, in James Mayall (ed.), *The Contemporary Commonwealth: An Assessment 1965-2009* (Oxford, 2009), p. 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Andrestinos N. Papadopoulos, *Multilateral Diplomacy within the Commonwealth* (The Hague, 1982), p. 137.

The 1965 Conference should have been the end of an era of anglocentricity – the last before the Secretariat commenced operation, and, although unknowable at the time, the last before the January 1966 Conference in Lagos broke the thirty-four year gap since an Imperial or Commonwealth Conference was last held outside London. Yet there were few signs that Britain was surrendering its control. Changes made in 1964 by Douglas-Home were largely symbolic: for the first time seating was by alphabetical order rather than by national seniority, a method which had hitherto kept the old Commonwealth in the centre and placed African leaders on the margins.⁵⁰ Philip Murphy has uncovered how Harold Wilson floated a more radical idea soon after Labour came to power: the creation of an additional Commonwealth forum along the lines of the Bilderberg Conferences, at which business leaders and opposition politicians could join ministers in a completely confidential setting. This would not replace the Prime Ministers' Conferences, but it would provide a venue for more intimate and speculative debate, freed from the need to publish communiqués and appeal to domestic audiences.⁵¹ Yet using Bilderberg as the model was problematic, as Bilderberg invitees were almost exclusively from the developed world; would African leaders be consigned to the peripheries again? Furthermore, Wilson gave the task of developing the idea to the Duke of Edinburgh and Earl Mountbatten of Burma, who gave it an undeniably regal working title: 'Windsor Conferences'.⁵² It hardly evoked a deanglicisation of Commonwealth relations. The scheme was abandoned but its mere existence implied that if it lost the ability to shape the Conference agenda after the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Britain could find alternative means of consultation by putting greater emphasis on more intimate, unofficial forums. Like Douglas-Home the year before, Wilson was under pressure to make Rhodesia the first item on the Conference agenda. Wilson's response was bold: instead of giving a purely descriptive review of the international situation as

⁵⁰ Twenty-ninth meeting, 1 July 1964, in 'Defence and Oversea Policy Committee Minutes 1964', TNA CAB 148/1.

⁵¹ Philip Murphy, 'By Invitation Only: Lord Mountbatten, Prince Philip, and the Attempt to Create a Commonwealth "Bilderberg group", 1964–66', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33:2 (2005), p. 254.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

the customary first item, he opened by advocating that the Commonwealth make itself a mediator on the global stage through a 'Commonwealth Peace Mission' to Vietnam.⁵³ Wilson proposed that a panel of prime ministers, led by himself, conduct meetings in Hanoi, Saigon, Moscow, Peking and Washington to attempt and broker a peace agreement. However, only Washington offered to receive the mission. North Vietnamese authorities justly pointed out that a Commonwealth peace initiative would not be acceptable to them whilst Australia and New Zealand continued to participate in the conflict on the South Vietnamese side. Even though the peace mission proved wholly ineffective, it showed that as late as 1965 the British Prime Minister could elevate his personal scheme to the top of the agenda. Eric Williams thought the whole structure of the 1965 Conference was rather arbitrary, with topics organised around geographic areas. He argued that this made cross-continental comparisons difficult, neutering one of the chief advantages of the Commonwealth's broad geographic spread.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Wilson's agenda was a valiant attempt to refocus the Conferences on foreign affairs, after years of internecine conflict. Any hopes that this focus could be maintained were dashed less than five months later when Rhodesia unilaterally declared independence on Remembrance Day, 11 November 1965.

Convening in Lagos rather than London in January 1966 gave the embryonic Commonwealth Secretariat an obvious opportunity to dispense with the weight of almost eighty years of conventions from the Colonial, Imperial, and Prime Ministers' Conferences. Much of the correspondence in the short lead up to Lagos described it as an 'emergency' meeting, offering a plausible cover for drastic changes to the conduct of the Conferences.⁵⁵ Yet the opportunity was not taken, and the gathering was remarkably similar to those in London. This was because

⁵³ Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), p. 341.

⁵⁴ 'Report by the Prime Minister on the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference', July 23 1965, in EWMC MS 747.

⁵⁵ First meeting, 11 January 1966, PRAAD RG 17/2/491.

the founding documents of the Secretariat prescribed that it would only ‘service’ the Conferences and could not ‘arrogate to itself executive functions’.⁵⁶ Even within this circumscribed framework, the room for initiative at Lagos was limited by the participation of Burke Trend as a member of the British delegation. As Cabinet Secretary, Trend had responsibility for administrative arrangements at the 1964 and 1965 Conferences. He had even been listed in previous Conference minutes as head of the ‘Secretariat’ provided by the Cabinet Office.⁵⁷ While it was natural that Wilson would want the counsel of his most senior civil servant in Lagos, Trend’s presence must have been a curb on the ability of Arnold Smith to rewrite tradition. Moreover, Nigerian Prime Minister Balewa was a noted anglophile and his chairmanship emulated that which he had experienced in London since 1961.⁵⁸ Britain sent Joe Garner to Lagos before the Conference seeking Balewa’s cooperation in guiding the Conference away from a hard line. Balewa proved agreeable, with Garner reporting that he would ‘certainly be willing to try’ to resist the issue of any communiqué at all.⁵⁹ Moreover, while the Lagos Conference was far shorter than usual at just two days, Balewa upheld customs such as a right of reply to his opening address from Canada, the ‘oldest member’ of the Commonwealth.⁶⁰ The question of whether Britain should be considered the senior member when gathering away from London was ignored. Despite the seriousness of the topic, the chummy tone common to discussion in London was largely preserved. One of Wilson’s speeches opened with a cricket reference, saying he ‘was sorry that Tanzania and Ghana were not at the conference table. He would not say anything about Australia. After all, he said, they have suffered an innings defeat in a test match’.⁶¹ Such banter covered for a glaring absence. After ten appearances at the Conferences, Menzies had refused to attend a single-issue Conference in Lagos, instead

⁵⁶ 1965 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 106.

⁵⁷ First meeting, 17 June 1965, TNA CAB 133/254.

⁵⁸ Douglas-Home, ‘Foreword’, in Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman*, p. vii.

⁵⁹ ‘Handling of a communiqué’, 7 January 1966, TNA CAB 133/341.

⁶⁰ ‘Wednesday 12 January 1966 - Morning Session’, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/143, LONB 65/3/1.

⁶¹ ‘Wednesday 12 January 1966 - Afternoon Session’, *ibid.*

designating the Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria as an observer. As an observer, Australia was excluded from the majority of sessions, which were restricted to prime ministers and a single advisor. In Menzies' absence, Britain's most ardent supporter was Hastings Banda of Malawi, but his contention that 'that settlers of today become indigenous tomorrow' did not endear him to other African delegations.⁶² The leader of the newest Commonwealth country, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, was more thoughtful, observing that 'I can understand both sides' because 'I too am a settler', in his case in South East Asia.⁶³

The fundamental problem was that sides were being taken at all; despite Balewa's best efforts, a single-issue Conference inevitably pitted Britain against the rest. Britain would not repudiate its position that Rhodesia was ultimately its exclusive responsibility, even though its authority had effectively been overthrown. Nor was the Commonwealth, despite its newly formed Secretariat, structured to undertake any collective commitment; in 1965 Pearson joked that 'the first important function of the secretariat is to refer things to the secretariat' to give an illusion of action.⁶⁴ His jest proved accurate when the January 1966 Conference instructed the Secretariat to set up two subcommittees, on sanctions and education for black Rhodesians. Unlike the subcommittees at the 1962 Conference, these were to be ongoing bodies, although their membership, consisting of Commonwealth High Commissioners to Britain, reasserted the centrality of London. The Conferences returned to Marlborough House in September 1966, but this did not mean a reversion to clubbish collegiality. Leaders who were restrained in Lagos, perhaps out of concern for the fragile government of their Nigerian host, could be less inhibited in the familiar environment of London. Now that Marlborough House was a dedicated Commonwealth space, the sense of being recipients of British hospitality was lessened, which

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ 'Wednesday 12 January 1966 - Morning Session', *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Pearson briefing, 24 June 1965, 'Canadian Papers Prepared for Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, file 4, R5276-62-X-E.

affected delegate behaviour. For example, while New Zealand officials noted that the second day of the Lagos Conference began twenty minutes late, as if emblematic of ‘African time’, the sessions in London in September were far more chaotic.⁶⁵ One plenary session went until 11.30pm, although it was perhaps indicative of the unchanging importance of the social side of the Conferences that this included an hour-long break for a reception. Another session was delayed for over two hours while the ‘Afro-Asian caucus’ met in a separate room; something that would have been unthinkable when gathered at No. 10.⁶⁶ Meeting separately was not in itself unreasonable – especially as the old Commonwealth had used a number of ploys to meet separately in the past – but to do so during a scheduled plenary session, leaving the host and other members waiting, was patently poor behaviour. The notion of a ‘caucus’ was also alien to the Conferences. In particular, the fact that the head of the Indian delegation, External Affairs Minister Sardar Singh, was invited by caucus members to be the caucus ‘chairman’ seemed to presage a formal split in the Conference and the publication of rival communiqués.⁶⁷ Such a move was exasperating for Wilson, who had offered to step aside as Conference chairman during the sessions on Rhodesia. On the other hand, Wilson had only been prepared to hand over to Pearson. Pearson had suggested that an Asian or African leader should assume the chair, but Wilson ‘dissented’, arguing that ‘there was no suitable Asian chairman’, and that of the Africans only Banda, who would ‘not be acceptable to the others’, supported the British line.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Wilson could not help but feel like he had been left in the chair solely to be interrogated. At one point he exclaimed that Britain ‘were being treated as if we were a bloody colony’.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ ‘Wednesday 12 January 1966 - Morning Session’, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ ‘The night they saved the Commonwealth’, *The Observer*, 18 September 1966.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ ‘Meeting between Prime Minister and Prime Minister of Canada at No. 10’, 4 September 1966, TNA PREM 13/782.

⁶⁹ SG 131/66/3, 2nd restricted session, 12 September 1966, in Pearson Papers, LAC MG26, N2, box 162, file CPM-1966, in W David McIntyre, *Winding up the British Empire in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford, 2014), p. 137.

At the conclusion of the September 1966 Conference it was broadly recognised that caucusing was of limited value. The Afro-Asians ran the risk of erecting a division between old and new Commonwealth; the sort of two-tier system which had been scrupulously avoided in decades past for fear of appearing to draw a colour line. If the caucus caused a split, the old Commonwealth could have found ways to consult amongst themselves and the new Commonwealth would lose much of its impact on British public opinion, where 'The Commonwealth' was still often used as a synonym for the white dominions. Menzies' de facto boycott in January could be overlooked as it occurred in Lagos, but an Antipodean or Canadian no-show in London would have had a big impact. Thus, when Holyoake declared toward the end of the September 1966 Conference that 'if this practice of splitting off into separate caucuses on racial lines continued, New Zealand would have reservations about attending future meetings', it had a salutary effect disproportionate to New Zealand's size.⁷⁰ Holyoake reported that many African leaders came to him to apologise, saying that 'they had not realised how hurtful they had been to the rest of us and to the traditions of the conference'.⁷¹ It is instructive that their regrets centred on disrespecting what Holyoake described as the 'traditional format' of the Conferences rather than the content of their interventions. It suggested that the Conferences could withstand virulent discord, but only if correct form was seen to be observed. Thus the September 1966 Conference still managed to include the usual review of the international situation, as well as sessions on economic affairs, disarmament, Cyprus and even Vietnam, with a token expression of regret at the failure of the Commonwealth peace mission. A collective message was sent to U Thant urging him to stay on as Secretary-General of the UN.⁷² By persevering with discussion of such topics, the Conferences could at least maintain the fig leaf of being a general summit on world events, and not just a venue for internal quarrels.

⁷⁰ P.M. "Concerned, disappointed" with Conference', *Evening Post* (Wellington), 19 September 1966, ANZ AAWV 23583 Kirk1/2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² 1966 Final Communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 127

Even if leaders viewed them as little more than a junket and a platform for haranguing Britain over Rhodesia, it was impossible to deny that the Conferences still had a fraternal flavour. Wilson addressed his fellow prime ministers as ‘brother members’ as if in a Masonic lodge.⁷³ The preservation of the artificial distinction between plenary and informal sessions gave rise to some idiosyncratic gatherings. At the January 1969 Conference, Nigeria refused to have the Biafran War discussed in plenary session, so Wilson arranged a drinks party at Lancaster House for 11.30am hoping that consensus on Biafra would be ‘arising from the fumes of gin and whisky’.⁷⁴ Wilson welcomed attendees ‘as personal friends of mine and not as heads of delegations’ – a very fine differentiation when all the partygoers were delegation heads. He stressed that the bout of daytime drinking was not a formal meeting, but rather a ‘spontaneous informal briefing discussion which Chief Awolowo would initiate’.⁷⁵ It is unsurprising that not all leaders comprehended Wilson’s torturous delineation between formal and informal sessions, with Australian Prime Minister John Gorton bluntly asking the room what they were there for.⁷⁶ Wilson was frank in responding that ‘our respective peoples would not understand a post-conference admission that Nigeria had not been discussed, and that this informal gathering would enable us to say that there had been discussions’.⁷⁷ This shows how informal meetings were used constantly throughout the period to uphold the façade of Commonwealth unity. Each prime minister knew that the cloak of informality allowed them to tailor the public message of the Conferences to their domestic audiences. The drinks party device also shows how almost four years into the operation of the Secretariat, the Conferences were still moulded by the tone of their host. Wilson set ground rules at the first session of the 1969 Conference

⁷³ ‘Tuesday 11 January 1966 - Morning Session’, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/143, LONB 65/3/1.

⁷⁴ ‘Note for the record: Meeting at Lancaster House: Wednesday, January 15 1969 at 11.30am, Dictated by the Prime Minister’, TNA PREM 13/2540.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

which were almost schoolmasterly in their concern for the behaviour of delegates. They were instructed that ‘none of them would doubt the sincerity of any other colleague’ and that ‘all meetings should start punctually at 1000 hours in the morning and at 1500 hours in the afternoon of each weekday ... even if there were some absentees’.⁷⁸ There was even a roll call: advisors had to fill in attendance forms to ensure their names were listed correctly in the minutes and leaders were told to arrive at Marlborough House in alphabetical order, in order to avoid ‘serious cases of misidentification’ which had previously ‘bedevil[ed] reports of the opening ceremony’.⁷⁹ Evidently, the British press was still struggling to distinguish African leaders from their chauffeurs.

More importantly, the very notion of an ‘opening ceremony’ beyond a brief photograph of familiar faces suggests that the essential quality of intimacy had been lost. Commencing in wartime, the Prime Ministers’ Conferences were significant because the content was of global import, such as the 1944 discussion on the shape of the UN. By the end of the period, Conferences were significant on account of their size – increasing to thirty countries by 1969 – but the content was increasingly banal. One of the proposals for greater unity in 1969 was the operation of cruises for school children to Commonwealth countries. One exasperated official observed that ‘the local villagers would not continue indefinitely to line the village streets and cheer as the bus loads drive by’.⁸⁰ Even the name of the shipping company, British India Line, was an anachronism. Likewise, the Conferences at Marlborough House were at risk of becoming like their St James’s neighbour, the East India Club; an elegant venue with the name of a vanished constituency, obsessed with the minutiae of membership. Changes were trivial rather than timely. A meeting of liaison officers was informed that a ‘precedent will not be

⁷⁸ First meeting, 7 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539.

⁷⁹ ‘Administrative Arrangements Aide Memoire’, 24 October 1968, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/148, LONB 65/3/1/A; ‘Meeting of Liaison Officers’, 3 December 1968, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ S.M.E. Goodfellow, Department of Education and Science to R. Walker, Commonwealth Office, 21 June 1968, TNA CAB 164/101.

followed' at the 1969 Conference: instead of gifting zip satchels to delegates, Britain would be giving out pens – a 'super' pen for leaders and a 'not quite so super' pen for other attendees.⁸¹ Even this innovation only occurred because the satchels 'would not be big enough to hold all the documentation this time'.⁸² The Conferences were producing thicker paperwork, but the thread of commonality was getting thinner. Nor did the change of name to CHOGM and the move to Singapore in 1971 result in much more than a literal change in climate. The emphasis on precedent and the classical proportions of Marlborough House had at least restricted delegations to two rows of advisors behind leaders, begrudgingly extended to three rows by 1969.⁸³ In contrast, the spacious convention centre in Singapore accommodated up to two hundred people. In a way, the Commonwealth had returned to the era of Imperial Conferences, with large venues and larger retinues. Nonetheless, the meeting in Singapore demonstrated the Commonwealth's continued ability to be flexible within an outwardly structured form. One of the restricted sessions – limited to the heads of government and one advisor each – went on until 4.00am.⁸⁴ Therefore, even if procedure and precedent made for stultifying plenary sessions, there was still enough happening in restricted meetings and on the fringes to merit consistently strong attendance from leaders.

It was often joked that if the Commonwealth did not exist there would be no need to invent it. However, if the Prime Ministers' Conferences had not grown out of the Imperial Conferences, it would have been necessary to invent them as a vehicle for bilateral interests, given that formal forums between Britain and other Commonwealth countries were rare. For instance a Canada-United Kingdom ministerial committee established in 1967 met only once, while the official vehicle for Australian-United Kingdom ministerial meetings, the inelegantly named AUKMIN,

⁸¹ 'Meeting of Liaison Officers', 3 December 1968, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/148, LONB 65/3/1/A.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Snelling, 'British delegation attendance at meetings of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers', 31 December 1968, TNA CAB 164/413.

⁸⁴ W.D. McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth 1965-90* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 32.

only commenced in the 2000s.⁸⁵ Thus, while the Conferences appeared heavily circumscribed by precedent and rules of conduct, they were in fact an amalgam of personal, official and public relations. Despite all the vicissitudes the Commonwealth faced, the impact its peak gathering had on participants was remarkably consistent. Diefenbaker recalled that the Conferences had ‘a sameness about them.’⁸⁶ This sameness was problematic. The format, which enabled the British chairman to appear in control even when he was the chief object of opprobrium, disguised the fact that British interests were drifting away from the Commonwealth. At the 1971 CHOGM, Britain’s third proposal for EEC entry received far less hostility, even though it did less to protect Commonwealth interests than in 1962. Wilson had conspicuously avoided holding a Prime Ministers’ Conference in 1967 when Britain had made its second attempt to join the EEC, which de Gaulle also vetoed. This underlined what a turning point the 1962 Conference was; it became safer for Britain to court accusations of failing to consult Commonwealth members rather than host another attempt to persuade them. This chapter contends that the 1962 Conference represented a moment of rupture, when economic self-interest triumphed over the familial niceties which had characterised the Conferences even during bitter disputes on South African membership. Yet this inflection point is difficult to prove because the hermeneutic of continuity in the culture of the Conferences was so strong. The clubbish feel gave an impression of imperturbable sameness. Even in 1969 the New Zealand delegation thought the Conference still had ‘a distinct “club” atmosphere’, reporting that ‘the newly emergent, small and economically weak nations find in their membership of the Commonwealth a certain sense of importance’.⁸⁷ In this regard, the Conferences had come full circle; just as the Imperial Conferences had raised the political status of the emergent dominions,

⁸⁵ John Hilliker and Greg Donaghy, ‘Relations with the United Kingdom at the End of Empire, 1956-73’, in Phillip Buckner (ed.), *Canada and the End of Empire* (Vancouver, 2005), p. 40; Max Blenkin, ‘Aust, UK defence, foreign ministers meet’, *The Age* (Melbourne), 21 October 2010.

⁸⁶ Diefenbaker, *House of Commons Debates*, 17 July 1964, Twenty-sixth parliament, Second session, volume 6, p. 5608.

⁸⁷ ‘Prime Ministers’ Conference London 7-15 January 1969 - Report of the New Zealand delegation’, ANZ ABHS 20358 W5400/85, KL 90/3/2.

the Prime Ministers' Conferences were providing a venue for small nations on an increasingly crowded world stage. While this was a far narrower role for the Conferences than had been envisaged in 1944, it nonetheless highlights the Commonwealth's inexhaustible capacity for self-preservation. In the period 1962-1969 the Commonwealth lost its economic purpose: preferences were whittled away, sterling devalued and the currency area disintegrated. It lost its 'world role': the rotating Commonwealth 'seat' on the UN Security Council was redistributed in favour of greater African representation, and attempts to reinsert itself into foreign affairs, such as through the Commonwealth Peace Mission to Vietnam, were fruitless. Yet the Commonwealth did just enough to ensure its survival – it gave itself an institutional form in the Secretariat, and the problem of Rhodesia, as divisive as it was, provided fodder another decade of debate at CHOGMs. Therefore, despite having 'all the weapons of standard international diplomacy' open to them, Commonwealth countries still chose to participate in the Conferences rebranded as CHOGM; club ties proved to be hard to unknot.

Chapter Four:

Personalities

‘It would no doubt be possible to write the history of the Commonwealth in biographical terms, and in many respects it would be illuminating. But historically the attempt would be almost as misconceived, though no doubt a good deal more entertaining, as the constitutional straitjacket into which the story was for so long forced to fit. It would be misconceived because it would rest upon a false equation of man and circumstances’.¹

Nicholas Mansergh rejected the notion of a biographical history of the Commonwealth. Yet he may have conceded the Prime Ministers’ Conferences were an aspect of Commonwealth relations which were particularly well suited to a biographical approach. The name itself put emphasis on individuals: Imperial Conferences which sought a single voice for a single crown had given way to a cacophony of voices: a cabinet of premiers with no junior ministers. Holyoake observed that ‘you had to fight to be heard’ at the Prime Ministers’ Conferences because each leader was ‘obviously used to having the last word at home’.² The title of the successor to the Conferences, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, has more bureaucratic connotations, as if leaders are just a synecdoche for their government apparatus. The title Prime Ministers’ Conference more effectively captured the sense that each leader was first among equals in their respective countries and as such could be the definitive voice of their nation’s interest, but still be open to the perspectives of their Commonwealth colleagues. The commonality of the title ‘Prime Minister’ helpfully elided differences in national size, wealth, and constitutional structure. The term continued to be used until 1969 even though some leaders were executive presidents, military rulers or even members of a National Liberation Council.³ For all the noble talk of the Commonwealth being an amalgam of peoples, or an

¹ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London 1969), p. 370.

² *New Zealand Herald*, 27 July 1964, Holyoake Papers, NLNZ MS-1814-283/6.

³ September 1966 Final Communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 133.

association of free nations, the term Prime Ministers' Conference suggests a firm focus on political power, as wielded by specific individuals. Therefore, in addition to outlining the impact that location, hospitality, precedent and structure – the 'circumstances' of the Conferences – this thesis must also look at the (with one exception, Ceylonese Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike) men who occupied the seats around the table. This is not to make a 'false equation'; nor is it to create a list of *dramatis personae* to animate the thesis. The cast of characters is too large to present pen portraits of each leader, and to do so would give only piecemeal insight into the evolution of the Conferences. It is useful, however, to examine some of the most influential actors, be it through longevity or originality, keeping in mind that the interplay between personalities was often crucial. A large proportion of pre-Conference briefs were occupied with biographical notes, and British high commissioners were typically tasked post-Conference with determining what visiting leaders had thought of the event. There was also a kind of butterfly effect in the Commonwealth, where a small impact upon one leader in one country could have a large consequence on another continent. Macmillan joked that a single editorial in the 'Winnipeg something-or-other' would be enough to sway Diefenbaker and thus tip the balance against South Africa at the 1961 Conference.⁴ This chapter will assess how particular relationships influenced the outcome of the Conferences. It will show how a single disagreeable delegate, such as South Africa's Eric Louw, could derail proceedings. It will also illustrate how independence leaders, such as Nehru, Nkrumah and Nyerere, through their force of personality and well-established individual political creeds, gave the Conferences a significance greater than the sum of its institutional weight. The chapter will demonstrate how major decisions about membership were often taken based on the character of the incumbent leaders rather than calculated policy. In particular, the chapter will look at the how individual

⁴ Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986* (London, 1989), p. 394.

traits moulded international changes, such as the Indian continuation and South African termination of Commonwealth membership.

Just as the constitutional status of the Commonwealth was often difficult to encapsulate, the scope of the prime ministerial power is famously undefined. The role has existed in Britain in some form since the eighteenth century, but does not appear in any British constitutional document, nor in Canada's and Australia's written constitutions.⁵ Its use in these dominions emerged through convenience to distinguish the leader of the dominion from provincial premiers. In the unitary state of New Zealand this justification did not apply, but Premier Richard Seddon adopted the title informally around the time of Australian federation in 1901 and his successor William Hall-Jones used the title exclusively.⁶ Thus its use was solely to heighten prestige, just as the grant of dominion status to New Zealand in 1907 conferred no increased powers. In later cases the title was used in a similar way, as part of a package of reforms on the road to complete self-government. As the title had no constitutional importance, it could be used fairly arbitrarily by British officials, for instance alongside the restoration of self-government to Malta in 1947 even though Malta did not become independent until 1964, and had its constitution and prime ministership suspended from 1958 to 1962.⁷ Southern Rhodesia had prime ministerial status from 1923, and did not lose it while part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland from 1953 to 1963. There was even a domestic British example, with a Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972. The sudden end of that position due to the resumption of direct rule during the Troubles may explain why that precedent which has been scrupulously avoided in recent decades, by styling the leaders of devolved administrations as First Ministers. The overall trend was that prime ministerial title was an intermediate step after a period of cabinet government. For example Nkrumah was released

⁵ Lauri Karvonen, *The Personalisation of Politics: A Study of Parliamentary Democracies* (Colchester, 2010), p. 25.

⁶ Gavin McLean, *The Governors: New Zealand's Governors and Governors-General* (Dunedin, 2006), p. 354.

⁷ Joanne Cocks, 'Sir Paul Boffa: The doctor and politician', *The Times of Malta*, 6 July 2012.

from prison in February 1951 and given the title 'leader of government business' before being restyled prime minister in March 1952.⁸ On other occasions the adoption of the title coincided with full independence, but as a whole the significance of the title was personal rather than constitutional. Much as invitations to Colonial and Imperial Conferences were used to raise the status of leaders on the road to dominion status, occasions where the prime ministerial title was granted before full independence implied that colonial officials had found an individual with whom they could work. This was often a fraught process of identifying 'moderates' amongst competing nationalist movements. Conversely, the title was also used as a simple recognition of popular appeal, and the authoritative air it provided made it difficult for opposition leaders to succeed. For instance in the Gold Coast, Joseph Boakye Danquah was seen by colonial officials as more moderate than Nkrumah, and elections were held in 1956 partly to give the federal model proposed by his movement a final chance, but the result only confirmed that Nkrumah's party commanded greater public support.⁹

Elevating leaders on the cusp of independence to being prime ministers was mutually advantageous. For colonial ministers, sharing a title with their metropolitan equivalent ensured symbolic equality. Thanks to the truncated language of telegrams, correspondence between leaders often opened with the pleasingly indistinguishable descriptor: 'for prime minister from prime minister'.¹⁰ For Britain, the elevation of a colonial leader to the grade of prime minister made that individual the clear conduit for relations with London, clearing the way for a non-political Governor-Generalship (the convention of promoting Governors to Governors-General upon independence was another example of marking a change in national status through the upgrading of rank). Newly-minted prime ministers were encouraged to directly correspond with their British equivalent. Conducting relations at the prime ministerial level

⁸ Richard Rathbone, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs* (Columbus, 2000), p. 29.

⁹ Richard Rathbone, 'Nkrumah, Kwame (1909?-1972)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁰ Attlee, telegram to prime ministers, 6 April 1946, in TNA CAB 21/1798.

reaffirmed the idea that Commonwealth countries fell outside the sphere of international diplomacy. It had the additional advantage of cutting high commissioners and external affairs ministers from the list of people Britain had to consult. Writing in the Australian context, P.G. Edwards observed that such a tactic had a long lineage:

Prime ministers were encouraged to become not just channels of communications and the principal spokesmen for Australian views, both at and between Imperial Conferences, but virtually the exclusive formulators of policy. Governments in London consistently made it clear that, if they had to take dominion opinions into account, they wanted those opinions to come from one authoritative exponent.¹¹

The propensity to confer with prime ministers to the exclusion of external affairs ministers continued into the post-War Commonwealth. The quantity of ministerial gatherings increased in later decades, with conferences for Commonwealth finance, health, education and law ministers being established by the end of the 1960s. Yet foreign policy remained the remit of prime ministers. The 1948 Prime Ministers' Conference recommended biannual foreign ministers' Conferences, but only one was ever held: in Colombo in 1950.¹² Even the tendency to style departments as 'external' rather than 'foreign' affairs derived from the desire to posit Commonwealth countries as 'not foreign'.¹³ Senior Commonwealth countries resisted renaming their external ministries as foreign ministries until the end of the period being examined or after – New Zealand in 1969, Australia in 1970, Canada in 1993 – while to this day India preserves the use of external over foreign.¹⁴

¹¹ P.G. Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: The Making of Australian Foreign Policy, 1901-1949* (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 189-90.

¹² 'Commonwealth consultation machinery: proposals put forward at meeting of prime ministers in London October 1948', 30 October 1948, 'External Affairs: Commonwealth Conferences: Correspondence and Memoranda 1948-49', LAC MG26-L, volume 233.

¹³ Dermot Keogh, 'Ireland: The Department of Foreign Affairs' in Zara Steiner (ed.), *The Times Survey of Foreign Ministries of the World* (London, 1982), 290.

¹⁴ Ian McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels: Letters between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner, 1946-1966* (Wellington, 1999), p. 30; 'Dept's New Name', *Canberra Times*, 7 November 1970, p. 1; Karsten Jung, *Of Peace and Power: Promoting Canadian Interests Through Peacekeeping* (Bern, 2009), p. 25.

In addition to the semiotics, personality differences were also a reason for discouraging the presence of foreign ministers at Prime Ministers' Conferences. On a number of occasions, foreign ministers attending the Prime Ministers' Conferences were a cause of friction. H.V. Evatt, who served as Australian External Affairs minister 1941-1949, was a perennial headache for British officials, being one of very few attendees to demand a change to the minutes they compiled. In 1946, Cabinet Office Principal Assistant Secretary Christopher Eastwood wrote – in the finest of civil service language – that 'Dr. Evatt has asked for amplification of certain of his remarks', almost all of which comprised mentioning his name more frequently. For example: "MR. CHIFLEY and DR. EVATT said that it was essential" etc.¹⁵ Another difficult character was Krishna Menon, Nehru's de facto foreign minister. A Canadian briefing from 1957 contended that Indian influence diminished when Menon attended: 'Nehru is not expected to play the dominant role which he has fulfilled at most of the prime ministers' meetings held during the past ten years. Also, he will be accompanied by Mr. Krishna Menon who, because of his thorny personality, is not regarded with favour by any of the other Commonwealth prime ministers.'¹⁶ British biographical notes for the 1956 Conference noted that Menon was a Labour councillor in London until 1947 and a general election candidate in Dundee in 1939 before being deselected for 'having spoken from a communist platform'.¹⁷ Suspicion sometimes gave way to outright hostility. Indian Deputy High Commissioner to Britain Y.D. Gundevia recalled that Douglas-Home 'literally hated Krishna's guts'.¹⁸ Foreign ministers accompanying leaders may have been a nuisance, but more concerning for Britain were instances where foreign ministers attended in the place of prime ministers. For instance, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda sent his foreign minister Simon Kapwepwe to the September 1966 Conference. Malcolm MacDonald's biographer Clyde Sanger described Kapwepwe as a 'smoulderingly angry

¹⁵ Eastwood to Tilbury, 27 April 1946, TNA CAB 21/1798.

¹⁶ 'Probable attitude of other delegations', 21 June 1957, 'Conferences - Commonwealth - Prime Minister's Conferences', LAC RG24-B-2, volume 21577, S-2-5020-2.

¹⁷ 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1956 Biographical Notes', TNA MAF 255/364.

¹⁸ Y.D. Gundevia, *Outside the Archives* (Hyderabad, 1984), p. 176.

man with memories of how he and other African troops who returned from liberating Ethiopia from the Italians had to stand by while Italian immigrants took land in the Rhodesias'.¹⁹ As Kaunda was known for unfailing courtesy, sending Kapwepwe allowed Zambia to take a more personally aggressive line at the Conference, to the extent of Kapwepwe publicly calling Wilson a 'racialist'.²⁰

The most challenging character to deputise at the Conferences was Eric Louw who headed the South African delegation in 1948, 1957 and 1960, and assisted Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom in 1956. No one was more uniformly maligned in biographical notes. The 1956 British brief described him as 'vain, prickly and cantankerous' and reminded readers that in 1938 he tabled a bill to restrict Jewish immigration into South Africa, adding slightly unconvincingly that 'he now says he is not anti-Semitic'.²¹ British High Commissioner to South Africa John Redcliffe-Maud returned to the theme in 1960, declaring that 'it is tragic that this unpopular, unprepossessing and neurotic figure, so disturbingly reminiscent of Dr. Goebbels, should have to represent South Africa before the bar of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting'.²² Redcliffe-Maud's opinion was echoed by James Hurley, Canadian High Commissioner to South Africa, who wrote that Louw 'is a sad sack obsessed with wickedness of all foreigners'.²³ Such character sketches were not just for the entertainment and edification of the reader; they were a reasonable predictor of behaviour. The 1956 British brief observed that Louw 'is perpetually engaged in arguments with the press and keeps a voluminous collections of press cuttings to which he frequently refers'.²⁴ This trait manifested itself at the 1960 Conference. In the first informal session to discuss apartheid, Louw dedicated the first thirty minutes to critiquing

¹⁹ Clyde Snager, *Malcolm MacDonald: Bringing an End to Empire* (Liverpool, 1995), p. 408.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1956 Biographical Notes', TNA MAF 255/364.

²² Maud to Home, 28 April 1960, TNA PREM 11/2909.

²³ James Hurley to Department of External Affairs, 11 April 1960, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1960', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

²⁴ 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1956 Biographical Notes', TNA MAF 255/364.

recent press on South Africa and defending the regime against newspaper reporting, which was hardly the primary concern of the assembled prime ministers.²⁵ Moreover, in what Menzies described as an ‘incredible folly’, Louw convened an evening press conference which was attended by 130 journalists, keen to interrogate a senior South African minister so soon after the Sharpeville massacre.²⁶ This was far larger than a typical press conference during the Conference, which as the next chapter will explain, usually attracted only journalists from the visitor’s home country or the specialist Commonwealth correspondents of the London papers. Menzies wrote that Louw ‘promptly proceeded to do battle’ with the journalists.²⁷ More worryingly, Louw breached the convention that delegates did not comment on the stance of other leaders. When asked by the press about Diefenbaker’s policy on apartheid, Louw responded ‘I do not know’.²⁸ At first glance this seems to honour the spirit of not commenting on other delegates, but the following day at the Conference Diefenbaker intervened ‘with some emotion’ to declare that Louw’s ‘do not know’ was ‘a gross misrepresentation’ given that he had already devoted forty-five minutes during the Conference to outlining Canada’s attitude towards apartheid. Diefenbaker accused Louw of speaking in a manner ‘calculated to do him very great harm in Canada’.²⁹ Diefenbaker may appear presumptuous in thinking that Louw’s comment was premeditated, but Louw had given the Canadian delegation reason to doubt him. Just before the 1960 Conference Louw had told Hurley that ‘he had plenty of material on Canada which he would use if he had to’, a statement which was so undiplomatic as to be tending towards blackmail.³⁰

²⁵ Menzies to McEwen, 6 May 1960, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hurley to Department of External Affairs, 11 April 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

It is difficult to envisage what Louw's material could have been – although it is possible that he kept a dossier on each country just as he collected press clippings – but the threat was taken seriously by the Canadians. It was speculated that South Africa would deflect attention onto the racially restrictive immigration policies of other old Commonwealth members. Diefenbaker told his Cabinet that 'Louw could quite conceivably move for the free admission of all peoples within the Commonwealth to other Commonwealth countries. If this issue was brought out so starkly the white nations would be acutely embarrassed ... was Canada willing to open its doors to coloured immigrants?'.³¹ Diefenbaker's concern seems improbable, but there was a precedent for using the largely theoretical privileges of Commonwealth citizenship for political purposes. Ghana issued passports to South African activists which declared that the bearer was 'a Commonwealth citizen by virtue of section 9 of the Ghana Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1957 and is entitled to all privileges and immunities of a British subject'.³² With the unsurprising exceptions of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and South Africa itself, the passports were honoured by other Commonwealth countries.³³ Diefenbaker envisaged the South African External Affairs Ministry issuing passports to a few thousand Africans and facilitating their emigration to Canada, overwhelming Canada's quota of a few hundred non-whites per year.³⁴ The cabinet level discussions on the prospect of South Africa disrupting Canada's immigration policy point to an underappreciated factor in Diefenbaker's stance towards South Africa: fear that the regime was vindictive enough to try and expose the failings of other Commonwealth countries if it felt under threat.

Louw's behaviour at the 1960 Conference was distressing for other Commonwealth leaders as he had been relatively courteous at the 1957 Conference, the first at which a black African leader

³¹ Denis Smith, *The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto, 1995), p. 356.

³² Geoffrey Bing, *Reap the Whirlwind: An Account of Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana from 1950 to 1966* (London, 1968), p. 327.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ H. Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto, 1989), p. 189.

joined the table. His hospitality in inviting Nkrumah out to lunch had given false hope, especially because it was not the only positive gesture. Later in 1957 Louw had written warmly to Nkrumah, invoking his 'pleasant recollections of our talk at the Dorchester hotel'. He expressed sympathy for Ghana, attempting to position it alongside South Africa as a misunderstood African country: 'I notice you are also running into trouble with people from England and elsewhere, who pay visits to your country and stir up trouble there. We have had considerable experience of these gentry, who have no knowledge whatsoever of conditions in our country, and after a brief stay here proceed to tell us how the country should be managed!'.³⁵ Nkrumah's response was consistent with his initial 'new boy' approach to the Commonwealth. He implied that Ghana would be tempered in any criticism of other countries because 'we are new to the game!'.³⁶ More significantly, he concurred with Louw's dislike of foreign visitors, stating that 'Such criticisms, as you say, would be considerably lessened if those making them had some idea of the local conditions in the country'. Nkrumah went on to declare 'we must be permitted to set our house in order in the way that we, as tenants of that house, alone understand', a statement which could have equally been uttered by Louw, and appeared to endorse the Commonwealth convention of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other members.³⁷ In any case, the civil relationship between Louw and Nkrumah had raised expectations that their two countries would exchange high commissioners. Thus it was a significant blow when Louw refused to countenance the suggestion at the 1960 Conference. This highlights two comparatively neglected aspects of South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, both of which relate to personalities more than policy. Firstly, while it was the 1961 Conference at which Prime Minister Verwoerd withdrew South Africa from the Commonwealth, the more detailed and acrimonious discussion took place at the 1960 Conference. It was the 1960 Conference at which the South African request to remain as a

³⁵ Louw to Nkrumah, 26 September 1957, PRAAD RG/17/1/82.

³⁶ Nkrumah to Louw, 30 December 1957, *ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

republic was tabled, and all precedent suggested that the matter should have been decided then. The line, spearheaded by Diefenbaker, that the 1960 Conference could not give an indication either way for fear of influencing the South African referendum was inconsistent with previous approvals of Pakistani and Ceylonese republican membership at the Conferences long before any formal action was taken to proclaim a republic – in Ceylon’s case, fifteen years before it became a republic as Sri Lanka in 1972. Admittedly, neither country had a referendum on the subject, but the disinclination to accept Louw’s undertaking that South Africa would not reveal a pre-approval of Commonwealth membership before the referendum underlined how delegates distrusted him.³⁸ Prime ministers may have felt that having survived combat with Louw in 1960, they would be able to reach a final decision with Verwoerd at the next Conference.

The second underappreciated aspect of South Africa’s withdrawal is the mildness of the concessions which other Commonwealth countries wanted. Other than espousing token representation of black South Africans in the South African parliament, Commonwealth leaders did not insist upon substantial change to the operation of apartheid as a condition of continued membership. Menzies identified that ‘the real question was the policy in its bearing upon other Commonwealth countries’.³⁹ Even the most innocuous of Commonwealth interactions, such as student exchange programmes, were rejected by Louw. According to Menzies, the Tunku said during the 1960 Conference: ‘I do not quarrel with the white Australia policy ... but I have had thousands of Malayan students in Australia. Not one of them has encountered any race discrimination at all. They all go to the same schools ... frequently live in the same place. Could that happen in South Africa? Could I send students to your country under those circumstances?’.⁴⁰ Louw’s abrupt ‘no’ was an affront. The South African refusal to accept non-

³⁸ ‘Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers - Report by Nash’, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-123.

³⁹ Menzies to Verwoerd, 2 July 1960, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 9.

⁴⁰ Menzies to McEwen, 6 May 1960, *ibid.*

white high commissioners became a fundamental issue. The Asian Commonwealth countries had never sent high commissioners to South Africa and in 1957 Canada pointedly 'promoted' their High Commissioner to South Africa, Evan Gill, to the new newly created post in Ghana, a decision which Louw described as 'no compliment to South Africa'.⁴¹ On the sidelines of the 1960 Conference, Louw told Menzies that the accreditation of Asian and African diplomats, who would bring their own staff and expect to be housed in white areas 'would run counter to the policy of separateness'.⁴² Such a statement suggested that the stability of apartheid was remarkably fragile, given the small numbers which would have been involved. Louw's refusal was taken personally by the Tunku, who retorted that he would be denied permission to stay in first-class hotels in South Africa were he not a serving prime minister.⁴³ The refusal to compromise, even for a minimal number of diplomats, was deeply felt by Commonwealth leaders. Questions of status were deeply significant for the prime ministers, especially those such as Nehru and Nkrumah who had attained office after being imprisoned by colonial authorities. They had little inclination to be treated as second-class citizens again. In the face of Louw's intransigence, appeals were made directly to Verwoerd. Menzies wrote to Verwoerd at the conclusion of the 1960 Conference, calling him 'my dear colleague'. In addition to presenting himself as Verwoerd's peer, Menzies stressed that he was a 'friend of your country' and insinuated that the acceptance of diplomats would assuage the 'weaknesses of immaturity' amongst the new Commonwealth without being an admission of equality with them. He wrote: 'many of these new nations seem to me to be much more affected by matters of personal prestige than by broad matters of political principles'. Throughout the letter, Menzies elevated personality over policy. He asserted that Ayub Khan, Nkrumah and the Tunku were not in a 'position to discuss the giving of the vote to one section or another' and added that he had 'not

⁴¹ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a Difference: The Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner 1880-2006* (Leiden, 2007), p. 137; M.E. Allen to Snelling, 5 July 1957, in TNA DO 35/6191.

⁴² Menzies to Verwoerd, 2 July 1960, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

hesitated in private to have a bit of fun with them on their electoral set-up'.⁴⁴ The implication was that the new Commonwealth was not immune to criticism, but would only tolerate it coming from a fellow prime minister in the intimate surrounds of the Conference.

Another reason why Louw's deputising for Verwoerd was so damaging was that the Conference format exacerbated tensions. As Louw was not a prime minister, on occasions when there was a set speaking order, he came last in the order of precedence. This meant he could intervene at the end of discussions, frustrating efforts to reach consensus. For instance, Nehru recorded in his notebook that Louw opposed a benign Malayan proposal for greater technical assistance and personnel exchanges in the Commonwealth. Louw argued that 'This question should be dealt with on a regional basis – except in the case of highly industrialised countries', to which he added that 'South Africa is also an underdeveloped country' and would not participate.⁴⁵ Thus the entire scheme floundered because of Louw's rejection of a common approach. Verwoerd's absence in 1960, due to his hospitalisation after an assassination attempt, gave Louw an additional stalling tactic: pausing the meeting to telephone Pretoria. Nehru observed that that during the final session on the 1960 communiqué, Louw accepted the wording but still rang Verwoerd for his approval.⁴⁶ Such a practice, if carried into a larger Commonwealth with several absentee prime ministers, would have made the Conference entirely disjointed. There was also concern that South Africa would force the introduction of balloting to the Conferences by trying to veto Ghana's application to continue in the Commonwealth as a republic, which was also being considered at the 1960 Conference. Louw could withhold approval unless South Africa received reciprocal backing for its republican membership. Faced with such resistance, the Commonwealth could have needed to take a majority vote, which

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Nehru Notebook, 12 May 1960, in 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference London May 1960', Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), Acc1473.

⁴⁶ Nehru Notebook, 13 May 1960, *ibid.*

would likely result in either South Africa or Ghana leaving. A vote would have been an unprecedented step, for as Menzies wrote: 'We have never had a vote on anything'.⁴⁷ Thus it was a relief when Louw acquiesced to Ghana's application, although he interpreted it as strengthening the case for South Africa's application, now deferred to the next Conference.

While the 1960 Conference did no more than postpone the South African question, it nonetheless appeared that the Commonwealth had defused a crisis. The danger of Ghana's application being used as a bargaining chip had passed. The detailed discussion had helped illuminate where the biggest objections to continued South African membership would come from, with the Tunku being keenest amongst the new Commonwealth to prosecute the issue in public, and Diefenbaker the most equivocal of the old Commonwealth leaders. Over the following year, Diefenbaker's utterances were carefully monitored by Britain. Shortly before the 1961 Conference Macmillan despaired that 'Diefenbaker is taking a "holier than thou" attitude, which may cause us infinite trouble. For if the "Whites" take an anti-South African line, how can we expect the Browns and Blacks to be more tolerant?'.⁴⁸ An Canadian emphasis on the moral case for rejecting South Africa's application would have been troublesome for Macmillan, who was adopting the stance that the application for membership as a republic was a 'technicality' and should be approved on the strength of precedent.⁴⁹ The British rhetorical line was that the Commonwealth was 'an association of peoples, not governments'.⁵⁰ Before the Conference Macmillan wrote to Diefenbaker and Nehru asserting that exclusion would dishearten black and moderate white South Africans, condemning them to 'further years of apartheid and ever-growing bitterness'.⁵¹ Macmillan also held a meeting with the Tunku two days before the 1961 Conference, at which the Tunku accepted the technicality line and

⁴⁷ Menzies to McEwen, 6 May 1960, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 422, folder 9.

⁴⁸ Macmillan diary, 16 November 1960, in Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, p. 392.

⁴⁹ 'Prime Minister and the Tunku, 10am', 6 March 1961, TNA PREM 11/3217.

⁵⁰ 'Matchet's Diary', January 21 1961, *West Africa* (London), p. 69.

⁵¹ Snelling to McLennan, 15 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6191; Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, p. 392.

undertook not to ‘initiate’ any move for South African expulsion.⁵² Finally, the day before the Conference opened, Macmillan met with Verwoerd, who was recorded as having claimed, almost mawkishly, that South Africa was ‘very anxious to stay in the Commonwealth. Not just for a year or two, as had been rumoured by some, but for always’.⁵³ Therefore, much like the 1960 Conference where key elements like the Tunku’s protest in the opening session and the adoption of small informal meetings had been prearranged, Macmillan’s approach in 1961 had been signalled to the other prime ministers beforehand. Indeed, the 1961 Conference initially ran much more smoothly than its predecessor. In 1960, the Tunku and Louw had held emotive press conferences on apartheid, which necessitated a special restricted Conference session at which Macmillan attempted to mediate: ‘I am not speaker, I have no authority to give ruling on points of order ... but perhaps I may offer some reflections? Why have these public statements been made, by Mr Louw and the Tunku, and why are we discussing them this morning?’⁵⁴ In 1961, however, the prime ministers managed to keep dissent in-house, and after three days of discussion were ready to consider a draft communiqué which would keep South Africa in the Commonwealth.⁵⁵

The draft presented to the prime ministers had been revised at Verwoerd’s request to incorporate a paragraph which outlined the South African viewpoint. The balance of the communiqué explicated that the other prime ministers did not agree, but Diefenbaker and Menzies, speaking first, both deemed that the draft gave too much emphasis to Verwoerd’s views.⁵⁶ Balewa went further and argued that the inclusion of Verwoerd’s view in the draft would imply that the other leaders ‘acquiesced’ in the continuation of apartheid. In particular Balewa was aggrieved at Verwoerd’s attempt to interpret apartheid as ‘good neighbourliness’,

⁵² Prime Minister and the Tunku, 10am, 6 March 1961, TNA PREM 11/3217.

⁵³ Note for the Record, Meeting with Verwoerd, 4:30p.m., 7 March 1961, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ ‘Outline for statement at private session on Monday May 9 1960’, TNA PREM 11/2909.

⁵⁵ Twelfth meeting, 15 March 1961, TNA DO 161/156.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

stating ‘that is an insult’.⁵⁷ The minutes record that Balewa made the first threat of withdrawal. His speech concluded by warning: ‘he would have to consider whether Nigeria should remain a member of the Commonwealth if South Africa stayed’.⁵⁸ Nehru also questioned the draft, arguing ‘the document before them was supposed to reflect the discussion of the last three days but in his view did not accurately represent it’. He moved beyond critiquing the draft to reopening debate over the principle: ‘In his view the meeting had not settled the question whether it was compatible with the spirit of the Commonwealth for South Africa to remain a member’. Nehru proposed that the rejection of apartheid by the other leaders be reinforced by adding the phrase ‘this policy was inconsistent with the basic principles of the Commonwealth’ to the end of the communiqué.⁵⁹ This could have been a ‘wrecking amendment’ designed to solicit a South African withdrawal, but it does not appear to have been interpreted as thus; Holyoake took it as the basis for a compromise: ‘all Commonwealth Prime Ministers would naturally prefer the draft communiqué to be amended in some way or other, but he was prepared to accept it in order to achieve a settlement, provided that the last sentence was strengthened in the way suggested by Mr. Nehru’. Holyoake added, however, that ‘All the prime ministers would have the right to raise the issue of the expulsion of South Africa at any time in the future’, which undercut the whole idea that the reapplication for membership as a republic offered a special opportunity to scrutinise South Africa’s policy. Nkrumah had already told the meeting that ‘he wished to make it clear that the government of Ghana reserved the right to raise formally at a later stage the question of the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth’, which elicited a sharp retort from Verwoerd: ‘he must reserve the right to propose the expulsion of Ghana from the Commonwealth because her policy was not in accordance with the principles of democracy’. Realising that the meeting was veering away from considering a draft that would settle the question to one which would carry it over into every

⁵⁷ Trevor Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman: Abubakar from the Black Rock* (London, 1991), p. 499.

⁵⁸ Twelfth meeting, 15 March 1961, TNA DO 161/156.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

future Conference, Verwoerd declared that South Africa 'could not continue as a member country if she was under the continual threat of expulsion' and that 'if the present formula before the meeting was merely one to enable an unwelcome member to remain, the South Africa government would have to reconsider its position'. Macmillan concluded that 'it was desirable for all of them to reconsider their position' and called for a 'short adjournment'. The minutes record that 'this was agreed'.⁶⁰ The tea break proved to be the only thing that all leaders agreed to.

When the meeting resumed Macmillan invited Verwoerd to make a statement. Verwoerd proclaimed that 'no member of any body could with self-respect retain its connection with what had become in effect a pressure group which subjected his country to continual criticism. In the circumstance, he formally withdrew his request for South Africa to continue to be a member of the Commonwealth'. Verwoerd was calm, but not especially gracious. He said that 'denunciations had come in the main from prime ministers who, in his opinion, had themselves flouted the basic principles of democracy', He then proceeded to name them: Nkrumah, Nehru and the Tunku. He concluded that the 'attitude' of the assembled prime ministers 'must mark the beginning of the disintegration of the Commonwealth'.⁶¹ Verwoerd's prediction proved false, perhaps on account of his own action: if South Africa had remained it would have been very difficult for the Commonwealth to grow. If a communiqué including Verwoerd's views had been published in 1961, even if accompanied by strong disclaimers from the other prime ministers, it is likely that most new nations would have refused to join upon independence. In any case, a compromise in 1961 would have only ensured a reprise at the 1962 Conference, which proved acrimonious enough when dedicated to the common market. Nonetheless, there was no elation amongst the prime ministers at South Africa's departure. A Buckingham Palace

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

reception was scheduled for that evening. The late arrival of the leaders was an indication that the meeting had not gone to plan. Nkrumah's private secretary Erica Powell recalled that Nkrumah arrived 'strangely depressed', telling her: 'so long as we were all able to meet together like a family round a table and express our opinions, there was always a chance that the points we made might one day be driven home to them and help to persuade them to relax their attitude. But now...'.⁶² Nkrumah's dismay indicated that the prime ministers had not entered the meeting with the intention of prompting South Africa to withdraw. Nkrumah felt that the Conference 'had somehow failed' when South Africa announced it would leave.⁶³ In later years Diefenbaker speculated that Macmillan had been 'tipped off' about South Africa's intention to leave, and chose to bring the crisis to a head at the 1961 Conference rather than let it linger.⁶⁴ It was true that Macmillan primary intervention in the final session was to propose the adjournment which preceded the withdrawal of South Africa's application, and that his concluding remarks after Verwoerd's statement were noticeably detached. Macmillan said 'There had been general agreement that there was no constitutional bar to the granting of this application; but the other prime ministers had not found it possible to dissociate from this issue the wider question of their attitude to South Africa's racial policies'.⁶⁵ It was as if Macmillan was upholding his technicality line even after it had failed.

Yet it is difficult to accept claims that Macmillan facilitated South Africa's withdrawal by refraining from a strong intervention at the 1961 Conference. Welensky argued that Macmillan policy was one of 'naked appeasement'.⁶⁶ Yet Macmillan had lobbied new Commonwealth leaders to accept South African membership as a technicality, which was an appeasement of

⁶² Erica Powell, *Private Secretary (Female)/Gold Coast* (London, 1984), p. 114.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World*, p. 123.

⁶⁵ Twelfth meeting, 15 March 1961, TNA DO 161/156.

⁶⁶ Roy Welensky, *Welensky's 4000 Days: The Life and Death of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (London, 1964), p. 304.

South Africa if anything. It was more likely that Macmillan's restraint in the meeting itself was born out of the dual role a British prime minister had as both chairman and representative of British interests. Speaking in the Commons, Macmillan reminded the House of his 'two functions' at a Conference, and seemingly prioritised his role as chair: 'First, as Chairman it was my duty to guide the discussion and try to lead it to the decision most helpful to growing co-operation within the Commonwealth. It was also my duty to present the view of the British Government...'.⁶⁷ Furthermore, doing anything to hasten the departure of South Africa would have offended Macmillan's historical sensibilities. British policy had always been predicated on keeping members in to smooth the transition from Empire to Commonwealth, even if this meant sacrificing many aspects of commonality, such as a shared crown and close defence cooperation. Thus, even the most quarrelsome member's departure was a blow. In 1960 Macmillan had written to Rab Butler that 'Once the Commonwealth begins to disintegrate I feel it is really finished ... I do not want to play the role of Lord North'.⁶⁸ This underscored how personal prestige could impact decision making. In one respect, 1961 was the logical time for South Africa to leave. Former Indian Cabinet Secretary N.R. Pillai observed that the 1960 Conference was numerically balanced between white and non-white leaders.⁶⁹ 1961 was the first Conference at which the new Commonwealth had a majority and so it could be argued the die was cast for South Africa, even without resort to a majority vote. Yet in actuality it was the specific personalities, rather than absolute numbers, which proved pivotal. Once again, South Africa's refusal to accept non-white high commissioners – the personal representatives of prime ministers – was an insuperable stumbling block. Macmillan recorded that 'even President Ayub, usually so moderate, was deeply offended by some of Dr Verwoerd's remarks' such as "there

⁶⁷ Macmillan, 'Union of South Africa (Withdrawal from Commonwealth)', *House of Commons Debates*, 22 March 1961, volume 637, column 443.

⁶⁸ Macmillan to Butler, 25 March 1960, in Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, p. 204.

⁶⁹ Canadian High Commission, New Delhi to Department of External Affairs, 15 June 1960, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1960', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

would have to be a special hotel for the African representatives, if admitted at all”⁷⁰. In addition to the personal offence, prime ministers had to assess their individual political situation. Macmillan judged that a decisive factor had been the position of Balewa, who ‘might not politically have survived putting his name to a document agreeing to South Africa’s continuing membership’.⁷¹ Of course, the confidential nature of the Conferences also allowed each leader to amplify his role after the event; Diefenbaker received acclaim in Canada for his stance, even though he remained uncertain about the long term consequences and hesitated to withdraw even small examples of preferential treatment towards South Africa, such as the Commonwealth postal rate.⁷²

In later years, South Africa’s withdrawal loomed large in the Commonwealth’s institutional memory. The reappearance of South Africa under Nelson Mandela at the 1995 Auckland CHOGM was celebrated as the fulfilment of a campaign for racial equality which commenced thirty-four years earlier. Yet the events of 1961 were more about preserving the status quo at the Conferences than taking a landmark stand for multiracialism. A key objective for the assembled prime ministers had been to preserve the clubbishness of the Conferences by avoiding a majority ballot. The Tunku had already made clear in 1960 that ‘It was not for Malaya, a newcomer, to take the lead in expelling a founder-member’.⁷³ Diefenbaker’s notes suggest that he would not have actively voted for expulsion, ‘If he wants to walk out this is fine ... we cannot throw them out’.⁷⁴ Even the Ghanaian delegation recoiled from moving for expulsion. Their 1961 brief espoused a complex plan for accepting South Africa as a ‘theoretical’ member but withdrawing recognition of the South African government when it changed from a monarchy

⁷⁰ Macmillan diary, 24 March 1960, in Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, p. 392.

⁷¹ Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 323.

⁷² Peter Stursberg, *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained, 1956-62* (Toronto, 1975), p. 165.

⁷³ CRO to British High Commission, Malaysia, 21 October 1960, TNA FO 371/149454.

⁷⁴ Diefenbaker note for file, 4 March 1961, ‘Diefenbaker correspondence January-March 1961’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 4, R3969-599-6-E.

to a republic, and encouraging non-Commonwealth countries to do the same – an oddly royalist way of denouncing the apartheid regime.⁷⁵ By resigning from the club rather than insisting on a vote, Verwoerd ensured that the initial consequences were personal rather than economic; a black-ball instead of a black-list. South Africa remained in the sterling area and did not automatically lose Commonwealth preferences. Notably, some of the early calls to withdrawal preferences from South Africa were couched in clubbish language. Labour MP Dingle Foot told the Commons that ‘while South Africa no longer paid the Commonwealth club subscription, she continued to use the club room free’.⁷⁶ It was another decade before a Conference was preoccupied with substantive action against South Africa: the intense debate at the 1971 CHOGM in Singapore over proposed British arms sales to South Africa.

Therefore, the conventional narrative wherein the 1961 Conference is the paramount turning point towards Commonwealth multiracialism is not wholly satisfactory. Instead, this thesis argues that the most important step on the path to multiracialism occurred in 1949, when India’s reapplication as a republic was accepted. This was a markedly more active decision, in that it required a positive declaration rather than simply accepting a withdrawal. Keeping India in the fold necessitated rejecting two applicable precedents from the preceding two years: the independence of India’s neighbour, Burma, as a republic outside the Commonwealth in 1948, and the final departure of Ireland with the passage of the Republic of Ireland Act, which came into force on Easter Monday 1949, just four days before the beginning of the 1949 Conference.⁷⁷ To make an exception for India in the face of these examples was a major challenge for a convention-bound grouping. For Britain, the desire to keep India in was part of a long lineage of Indian exceptionalism. As V.G. Kiernan observed, claims of ‘India in danger’

⁷⁵ ‘Policy in regard to South Africa - brief’, PRAAD RG 17/1/256.

⁷⁶ ‘British MPs approve bill on South Africa’, *Ghanaian Times*, 31 March 1962.

⁷⁷ Nicholas Mansergh, ‘Ireland: The republic outside the Commonwealth’, in Diana Mansergh (ed.), *Nationalism and Independence: Selected Irish Papers* (Cork, 1997), p. 170.

had been used throughout British imperial history to excuse all manner of policies. Kiernan famously remarked: ‘if there had been space-travellers in those days India would have been a compulsory reason for Britain to take part in the race to the moon’.⁷⁸ Bending membership rules could be justified on ‘India in danger’ grounds by the post-War division of the world into capitalist and communist blocs; even if India remained resolutely non-aligned in practice, Commonwealth membership would be interpreted in Moscow as a marker of sympathy for the West and in Washington as preventing a major landmass ‘turning’ communist.⁷⁹ A continued association with India would also buttress Britain’s global status; the ‘jewel in the crown’ had been so vital to British prestige that its retention in the Commonwealth would add lustre even outside of the crown. The benefits of Indian membership for the dominions were less clear. A Commonwealth comprising only monarchies would remain a powerful influence upon British politicians, officials and citizens. Even though it would not be a binding bloc, it would be more firmly Western in stance and have a military coherence; Ceylonese independence was accompanied by an agreement to host British bases while Pakistan had expressed a willingness to work with the West and its army retained a large number of British officers. Thus the links in the chain of defence between Britain, the Far East and the antipodes could have been preserved in addition to the constitutional tie of a shared monarch. Furthermore, the dominions did not need to embrace India as a republic to prove that the Commonwealth was multiracial. Indian delegates had first attended an Imperial Conference in 1921, securing a resolution that Indians domiciled in other parts of the Empire had a right to citizenship.⁸⁰ Even if the delegates of the Imperial period were representing the Raj rather than Indian nationalists, the fact remained that all Commonwealth countries – including South Africa – had accepted the participation of Nehru and other independent Asian prime ministers at the 1948 Conference.

⁷⁸ Kiernan, ‘Farewells to Empire’, p. 270, in William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization* (London, 2006), p. 917.

⁷⁹ Anita Inder Singh, ‘Keeping India in the Commonwealth: British Political and Military Aims, 1947-49’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20:3 (1985), p. 478.

⁸⁰ ‘Imperial Conference: The official report’, *Sunday Times* (Perth, W.A.), 7 August 1921, p. 1.

Thus if India withdrew upon becoming a republic, it would be clear that it was doing so on constitutional grounds, rather than because it was unwelcome in a hitherto all-white club. Indeed, Nandhini Iyer argued that it was precisely because India had participated in imperial bodies before independence that Commonwealth membership ‘did not complete the process of decolonisation, as it was to do for other colonies’.⁸¹ Given India’s unique status pre-independence, a similarly distinctive alternative mechanism, such as a treaty of friendship, could have been used to continue close relations with India without the additional complexity of having to conjure up a symbolic link such as the ‘Head of the Commonwealth’. Therefore, Nehru’s application – and its acceptance by the other prime ministers – suggested that all leaders placed a high enough value on the pre-existing arrangement of conducting relations through the Conferences to consider the system to be worth preserving.

Such an outcome was heavily influenced by prime ministerial personalities. Attlee sent envoys to Commonwealth capitals before the meeting but there was no predetermined outcome when the 1949 Conference opened.⁸² Equally, once the decision was made, each leader treated it as binding – no prime minister attempted to refer the question back to his cabinet, and Nehru got Commonwealth membership past the Indian Constituent Assembly with only a single vote against. Duncan Hall noted how significant this was: ‘In the long history of Commonwealth Conferences, the meeting of April 1949 has a special place of its own ... without reserving the rights of their Cabinets and Parliaments, the Prime Ministers took a decision and published it to the world’.⁸³ The Commonwealth had been lucky with the timing of the membership question. Smuts, who had been the most steadfast opponent of Indian membership, arguing that ‘close treaty relationships are ... the order of the day’, had been defeated in 1948 in favour of Malan, who as a Nationalist had a vested interest in establishing the principle that republics

⁸¹ Nandhini Iyer, *India and the Commonwealth: A Critical Appraisal* (New Delhi, 1983), p. 2.

⁸² Nye to Liesching, 1 March 1949, TNA DO 35/2205.

⁸³ H. Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (New York, 1971), p. 855.

could remain in the Commonwealth. Chifley was reluctant to loosen monarchical bonds, but also had great sympathy for India, intensified by his stopover in Calcutta on the way to the 1949 Conference: ‘When I think of the wealth that has gone out of this country and I look at the condition of these people, it makes my blood boil’.⁸⁴ If the Conference had occurred after Chifley’s defeat by Menzies in December 1949, the Australian outlook would have been different. Despite being Leader of the Opposition during the 1948 Conference Menzies nonetheless travelled independently to London and published opinion pieces espousing Commonwealth unity which had ‘kith and kin’ connotations. He wrote that: ‘*The time has come to notify the world ... that on all the great matters which touch and concern the freedom of man ... we British are one people*’ [his italics].⁸⁵ In addition, Mackenzie King had retired in November 1948 after a combined twenty-two years in office; if the Indian application had been tabled at the October 1948 Conference, King may have insisted on referring it to the Canadian parliament. Similarly, if Liaquat Ali Khan had assented to Indian membership as a republic while Jinnah remained Governor-General he may have been overruled. Jinnah was an activist Governor-General, and only after his death in September 1948 did Liaquat have the political authority to make a unilateral decision of behalf of Pakistan.

Liaquat’s acceptance of Indian membership at the 1949 Conference was an act of considerable generosity; he could have attempted to drive India out by holding out for a higher degree of Commonwealth cooperation. At the 1948 Conference he had insisted that each Commonwealth country agree to ‘regard communism as a menace to freedom’ and announced that Pakistan was ‘playing her full part in Commonwealth defence’; the implication being that non-aligned India was not.⁸⁶ He initially took a similar line in 1949, advocating that Commonwealth members ‘should declare their readiness to come to the aid of any of their number threatened by

⁸⁴ L.F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley* (Melbourne, 1961), p. 278.

⁸⁵ Menzies, ‘Commonwealth Conference’, *The Sunday Times* (London), 3 October 1948.

⁸⁶ Twelfth meeting, 20 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

aggression'.⁸⁷ At the conclusion of the first session he stated that he would reserve judgement on Nehru's proposals until he had studied them in writing.⁸⁸ A situation where India left and Pakistan stayed in would have been particularly unappealing to other members. However, Liaquat did not use the prospect to drive a wedge between India and the rest of the Commonwealth. He accepted Indian membership, but with one important qualification – a recorded minute that 'it could be logically assumed that a future meeting would accord the same treatment to any other member as had been according to India by this meeting'.⁸⁹ Therefore, the 1949 decision did not just make an exception: it reversed the precedents set by Burma and Ireland.

Liaquat's minute pointed to a future with multiple republican members, increasing the prospect of a large, multi-racial Commonwealth, but also giving South Africa a precept to invoke in its reapplication as a republic. In most other respects however, it was Nehru's personal vision which won through at the 1949 Conference. Malan was concerned that a King who was monarch to some members and symbolic head to others was a legal fiction. Chifley records that Malan's protests were silenced by a single caustic remark from Nehru: 'his cigarette held in a long holder ... [he] bent forward a little and asked "Dr Malan, I understand that in your church you are accounted a theologian of note: have you perhaps heard of the father, the son and the holy ghost?"'.⁹⁰ Later in the Conference, Liaquat tried to ensure that the declaration accepting Indian membership included a commitment to 'mutual assistance'; a suggestion which Fraser said he would back with 'not one of his hands in favour but two'.⁹¹ This was rebuffed in favour of a vague affirmation of 'peace, security and progress'.⁹² Even this was too much for Nehru,

⁸⁷ James Eayrs, *Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto, 1972), p. 250.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁹⁰ Crisp, *Chifley*, p. 277.

⁹¹ Eayrs, *Peacemaking and Deterrence*, p. 254.

⁹² *Ibid.*

who asserted that security ‘was much too strong a term since it implied an obligation to preserve the status quo. It should be struck out in favour of the word “liberty”’.⁹³ Nehru also targeted any traces of self-congratulation. He objected to the phrase in the draft communiqué that the Commonwealth ‘has proved its value as an instrument’. He attributed a very broad interpretation to it, arguing that it ‘implied to him that Commonwealth members had always been right. He could not say in honesty that he thought British policy in India right’.⁹⁴ Nehru even managed to get the communiqué phrased to imply a change in title for the Commonwealth. Fraser and Chifley wanted ‘British Commonwealth’ used, while Attlee sought to have British omitted throughout, seeing it as an additional hurdle to Indian membership. Nehru’s compromise was to use ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’ in the first paragraph which described the situation before the Conference, but to drop British from subsequent references.⁹⁵ While not made explicit, the obvious interpretation was that the British prefix would henceforth be dropped from official documents, in parallel with the acceptance of India as a republic. Even though ‘British’ continued to be in popular use for another generation – for instance, only in 1978 did the Commonwealth Games drop the prefix – the communiqué was a source of controversy in the antipodes. When the 1948 Communiqué had failed to use ‘British Commonwealth’ at all, Evatt told the Australian public that it was an oversight.⁹⁶ This was harder to maintain in 1949 when the term disappeared between paragraphs. Why then did Attlee, Chifley and Fraser fall in with Nehru’s phrasing? Perhaps because they felt that getting the monarch recognised under the moniker ‘Head of the Commonwealth’ was a positive result in the face of initial resistance. Krishna Menon had sought a title which recognised the King only as *primus inter pares* or ‘first citizen’ of the Commonwealth. Meanwhile Malan was convinced that any mention of headship contradicted the Statute of Westminster and had undertones of a

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁹⁶ Price, British High Commission, Canberra to CRO, 11 February 1949, TNA DO 35/2255.

superstate; like Liaquat on the possibility of becoming a republic, he was placated by the addition of a recorded minute which he could publicise in South Africa. Pearson also had reservations about the title but realised ‘it would not have been either easy or appropriate for the rest of us to have been less royalist than Mr. Nehru!’⁹⁷

Pearson’s jovial comment pointed to a broader truth: as the charismatic, unchallenged leader of the Commonwealth’s most populous nation, Nehru had a great deal of leverage. Having secured the principle of membership as a republic, he could afford to be generous in details such as the monarch’s title. Publicly, he attested that he had been ‘bad bargainer’ who was not accustomed ‘to the ways of the market place’ – a breathtaking claim for someone so involved in negotiations for the transfer of power in India. He proclaimed that it was ‘far more precious to come to a decision in friendship and goodwill than to gain a word here or there at the cost of ill will’.⁹⁸ Privately, he told his daughter Indira that he had not compromised on any substantive point; any objections from his domestic opponents ‘can only be on sentimental grounds and that too on false sentiment and hangover from the past’.⁹⁹ Instead of stoking anti-imperial sentiment, Nehru wrapped the Commonwealth in a sentimental language of his own, entrenching the propensity for leaders to describe the Commonwealth in words which were fulsome yet formless. In New York after the 1949 Conference he declared that ‘the most intimate ties ... are ties which are not ties’.¹⁰⁰ Nehru became the dominant figure at the Conferences of the following decade. He dined with Churchill after the 1949 Conference and found that that Churchill was ‘deeply moved by the recent decisions and more especially by my magnanimity’.¹⁰¹ That may seem immodest but there was no doubt that when Churchill returned to the prime

⁹⁷ Pearson to E.J. Tarr, 4 May 1949, in Eayrs, *Peacemaking and Deterrence*, p. 257.

⁹⁸ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, p. 337.

⁹⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Nehru, 3 May 1949, in Sonia Gandhi (ed.), *Two Alone, Two Together: Letters Between Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru 1922-1964* (New Delhi, 2004), p. 525.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London, 2004), p. 199.

¹⁰¹ Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Ghandi, 3 May 1949, in Gandhi (ed.), *Two Alone, Two Together*, p. 525.

ministership he saw Nehru as the leading visitor.¹⁰² Writing on the 1953 Conference, New Zealand Cabinet Secretary Foss Shanahan observed that ‘Much of the Prime Ministers’ meeting consisted in fact of a negotiation through discussion between Churchill and Nehru’.¹⁰³ Churchill listed the ‘enormous’ risks Britain assumed on behalf of the free world, such as being the base for America’s nuclear-armed planes, even though it made Britain a more prominent target for Soviet attack. Churchill asserted that ‘peace could only be assured if countries which loved peace were willing to pay a price for it’.¹⁰⁴ Nehru reasserted that non-alignment was the best contribution India could make, but Shanahan records that ‘Churchill pressed Mr. Nehru very hard. He pointed out that if other members of the Commonwealth declare that they disassociated themselves from the security of India (a thing they would die rather than do) India would be laid bare to the Soviet Union. He begged Mr. Nehru to realise that a price must be paid for security and all must cooperate to obtain it’.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, Shanahan concluded that ‘agreement among Commonwealth countries usually meant moving towards agreement with Mr. Nehru’.¹⁰⁶ In his later years, Nehru could mould Conference opinion with just a facial expression; Ceylonese Senator Cooray told the Canadian High Commissioner in Colombo that when Ceylon had introduced the idea of a Commonwealth Court in 1960, he ‘saw Nehru make a “why mouth” and he realised that he had made a bad start’.¹⁰⁷

Part of the reason why consensus coalesced around Nehru’s views was because he was seen by many old Commonwealth leaders – and saw himself – as having a special role as ‘interpreter’ to the Commonwealth.¹⁰⁸ He had been fêted by the Soviets and, as the doyen of the non-aligned

¹⁰² Churchill to Nehru, 30 June 1955, in Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (Delhi, 1997), p. 143.

¹⁰³ Foss Shanahan to Macintosh, 2 July 1953, ANZ ACIE 8798 EAW2619/132, PM 153/35/5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Canadian High Commission, Colombo, to Department of External Affairs, 2 June 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

¹⁰⁸ Judith Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (Newhaven, 2003), p. 255.

movement, he was considered to have privileged access to the official mind of Peking. Holland boasted of sitting next to Nehru at the 1956 Conference and told the New Zealand Parliament that he deferred to Nehru's views because he had been to Russia: 'he helped me in the private talks we have around the conference table'.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, hopes were high that Nehru could communicate the Commonwealth's stance to communist leaders. Secretary of the New Zealand External Affairs Ministry Alister McIntosh wrote to Holland in 1955 stating:

It seems fairly evident that Mr Nehru could succeed in persuading Chou-en-lai that the Americans were determined to hold Formosa at all cost ... It is not without hope that with Nehru working on Chou, the Commonwealth on the USA, and them in turn working on Chiang, it may be possible to achieve the objective of separating the two dogs by '80 miles of water' and so at least bringing about a cease fire.¹¹⁰

Such a chain of persuasion sounded optimistic but it aligned with Churchill's summation after the 1955 Conference. Coming just two months before his retirement, Churchill nonetheless described his chairmanship with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy: 'a hell of a business ... not at all like the old gatherings of the dominions ... I have held my own, and more than held by own ... I have led the discussions, made little jokes, given them ideas, and engaged in arguments'. He took greatest pride in his relationship with Nehru: 'I get on very well with him. I tell him he has a great role to play as the leader of free Asia against Communism ... oh, he wants to do it – and I want him to do it'.¹¹¹ Churchill, the former imperial diehard, ended his leadership as an acolyte of Nehru, describing him as 'the light of Asia'.¹¹² One of Nehru's few critics amongst the prime ministers was Menzies, his only rival for seniority, who complained that Nehru 'always made the same speech at meetings of the prime ministers. It was a speech about peace, about nobody menacing anybody, about the need to live peacefully with everybody'. Menzies retorted

¹⁰⁹ Holland, New Zealand *Hansard*, 9 August 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

¹¹⁰ McIntosh, 'Memo for the Prime Minister', 18 February 1955, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-075. K.P.S. Menon cites a similar reference: 'There was a saying in America that Eisenhower listened to Macmillan, Macmillan listened to Nehru, and Nehru listened to Chou en-lai, and so, in the last resort, Eisenhower was guided by Chou en-lai!' K.P.S. Menon, *Many Worlds Revisited* (Bombay, 1981), p. 326.

¹¹¹ Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965* (London, 1966), pp. 630-1, in J.D.B. Miller, *Sir Winston Churchill and the Commonwealth of Nations*, (St Lucia, QLD, 1966), p. 23.

¹¹² King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, p. 143.

‘that is all very well ... you are neutral, but you devote fifty-five per cent of your budget to defence. Against whom?’.¹¹³

Menzies’ rejoinder, in addition to demonstrating the frankness with which the prime ministers conversed, was a reminder that Nehru’s rhetoric did not always correspond with reality. Nehru informed reporters before the 1956 Conference that he was unconcerned about defence, declaring ‘the best defence is friendliness’.¹¹⁴ However Nehru exhibited little friendliness towards Suhrawardy, his Pakistani peer at the 1957 Conference. Nehru wrote to his finance minister T.T. Krishnamachari, asserting that ‘Suhrawardy has consistently behaved badly in keeping with his evil nature’.¹¹⁵ Nehru alleged that Suhrawardy ‘spent all his time in maligning India. He rather overdid this and the reaction later was not at all favourable to him. Apart from this, he has behaved badly in public, drinking too much and being boisterous. Even his friends here have therefore turned away ... in disgust. Some of the UK ministers expressed privately their opinion that he was a bit of a bounder’.¹¹⁶ This was relevant because of the pervasive feeling amongst Indian officials that Britain had a pro-Pakistan bias; any negative impact from Suhrawardy’s personal behaviour would be a positive for India.¹¹⁷ Yet Nehru did not have an unblemished reputation either. For instance, the 1956 British brief on him was amazingly enigmatic; whereas for other leaders it gave specific indications of topics to be avoided (for instance, reminding readers that Strijdom’s marriage to actress Martha Vane had been dissolved), for Nehru it simply stated: ‘His good qualities, which are numerous, and his defects, which are obvious, are too well-known in London to require further comment’.¹¹⁸ This could be read as an allusion to his close relationship with the Mountbattens, but it also reflects his

¹¹³ Note of conversation with Menzies, 23 March 1959, in Hall, *Commonwealth*, p. 869.

¹¹⁴ Nehru on arrival at London Airport, 22 June 1956, in M.S. Rajan, *India and the Commonwealth: Some Studies* (New Delhi, 1990), p. 139.

¹¹⁵ Nehru to T.T. Krishnamachari, 4 July 1957, in Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2: 1 May - 31 July 1957* (New Delhi, 2006), p. 635.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ S.C. Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth* (Agra, 1970), p. 75.

¹¹⁸ ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting 1956 Biographical Notes’, TNA MAF 255/364.

perfect attendance record at the Conferences over fifteen years: Nehru genuinely was the most familiar visiting leader. It is difficult to ascertain why Nehru attended so reliably, especially when leaving India could have serious repercussions. In 1962 Chinese troops were expelled from Indian-claimed border regions on the orders of Krishna Menon in Nehru's absence, sparking the Sino-Indian War.¹¹⁹ Conversely, Nehru may have felt obliged to attend to avoid giving his Pakistani counterparts an unchallenged platform: no Pakistani leader sent a deputy to the Conference until 1966, after Nehru's death. The most likely rationale was that Nehru actually enjoyed the Conferences. He told his Cabinet that his visits to London gave him 'mental refreshment' – although this could imply that they were less intellectually demanding than other tasks.¹²⁰ The best indication that his commitment to the Commonwealth was sincere was that the day before he died in 1964 he was still planning to attend that year's Conference.¹²¹

The prominence accorded to Nehru in London obscured the fact that the Conferences of the 1940s and 1950s were still centred on visitors from New Zealand, Australia and Canada. After Smuts' defeat, South African participation became begrudging; the mere participation of the nationalist government was considered an achievement, given that in opposition they had called for a boycott of the Conferences.¹²² Furthermore, the recognition Nehru received did not extend to other Asian prime ministers. This could be a matter of size. Ceylon tried to make a virtue of its small landmass, with Kotelawala marketing it as 'a potential Switzerland-in-Asia'.¹²³ Yet the prevailing tendency was to treat Ceylon with condescension. The 1956 British brief on Solomon Bandaranaike employed racial stereotyping, claiming that he had 'shared to the full the oriental habit of saying what he thinks his listener wants to hear' and 'the typical Ceylonese

¹¹⁹ Zachariah, *Nehru*, p. 246.

¹²⁰ Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life*, p. 244.

¹²¹ B.N. Pandey, *Nehru* (London, 1976), p. 435

¹²² Hurley to Department of External Affairs, 14 May 1956, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1956', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4776, file 50085-F-40.

¹²³ Don Taylor, *The Years of Challenge: The Commonwealth and the British Empire, 1945-1958* (London, 1959), p. 201.

trait of susceptibility to flattery'.¹²⁴ Nor did Asian prime ministers show much solidarity with each other: Nehru likened John Kotelawala to an Asian version of 'Colonel Blimp'.¹²⁵ After Liaquat's assassination, the next Pakistani to have a major impact on the Prime Ministers' Conferences was not a prime minister at all. Seizing power in a military coup did not seem to disqualify Ayub Khan from the Conferences. Indeed, he was comfortable in London precisely because of his military training at Sandhurst. Nehru's high status was also attributed to his familiarity with English norms. Denis Smith wrote that Diefenbaker considered Nehru 'a transplanted Englishman'.¹²⁶ This was doubtlessly meant a compliment, but it nonetheless implied that prime ministers were normatively white Britons and that the respectability of others was dependent upon their degree of assimilation. Even white leaders sought to reaffirm their Britishness. Welensky used to proudly boast that he was half Jewish, half Afrikaner and 'a hundred per cent British'.¹²⁷ A succession of New Zealand leaders depicted their country as if it were one of the home counties. When Sidney Holland visited Washington on the way to the 1953 Conference, he proclaimed 'I have come here to cement British-American relations'.¹²⁸ New Zealand prime ministers' identification with Britain extended to personal traits. Holyoake's 'plummy' accent prompted speculation in the *Observer* that he had received elocution lessons.¹²⁹ Evatt, who constantly agitated for a more independent Australian foreign policy, was suspicious of Walter Nash's 'striped trousers' and 'reckoned he thinks of himself primarily as an Englishman'.¹³⁰ The depth of affection New Zealanders felt for Britain was politically useful for the host nation; British leaders could emphasise the egalitarian nature of the modern Commonwealth, confident that their New Zealand visitor would reassure the British public that

¹²⁴ 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1956 Biographical Notes', TNA MAF 255/364.

¹²⁵ 'One of the family: Ceylon's PM', *The Observer*, 24 June 1956, p. 5.

¹²⁶ Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto, 1995), p. 304.

¹²⁷ Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2014), p. 70.

¹²⁸ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland, 2001), p. 319.

¹²⁹ Barry Gustafson, *Kivi Keith: A Biography of Keith Holyoake* (Auckland, 2007), p. 6; 'Premier who didn't raise hell', *The Observer*, Marshall Papers, NLNZ, MS-1403-155/3.

¹³⁰ Corner to McIntosh, 31 May 1946, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 57.

Britain remained at the centre. A *Yorkshire Post* profile on Holland during the 1951 Conference remarked: 'It was stimulating to hear the drums of Empire rolling once again'.¹³¹

In some respects, the deference exhibited by New Zealand prime ministers made it more difficult for Britain to manage the relationship. For example, New Zealand prime ministers placed great weight on the guidance of the Imperial Chiefs of Staff. McIntosh felt that Holland took the imperial prefix literally, writing in 1956 that 'the prime minister requested, as he always does, that the United Kingdom defence authorities should give him a new appreciation of the defence situation and what New Zealand could best do. As always, this is most embarrassing for the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff, who point out to their Ministers that responsibility for such advice rests with the New Zealand Chiefs of Staff'.¹³² For their part, British officials had to be careful that the Chiefs of Staff did not harness New Zealand's zeal to get proposals past more reluctant British politicians. The 1946 proposal to decentralise defence manufacturing unsurprisingly gained fervent antipodean support, prompting Eric Machting of the Dominions Office to warn 'some of the strategic principles proposed by the Chiefs of Staff represented the practical policy of the United Kingdom government to a greater degree than was justified': code for being politically impossible.¹³³ Until the common market proposal changed relations irrevocably, only Peter Fraser amongst post-war New Zealand leaders broke the pattern of reverence towards Britain. He espoused a more economically equitable Commonwealth, arguing at the 1948 Conference that 'it had formerly been assumed that the southern hemisphere countries were, and should remain, primary producing countries only. That idea was now obsolete'.¹³⁴ The following year Fraser was the most sceptical prime minister regarding India's membership application. Britain's attempt to secure an agreed line by sending envoys to

¹³¹ 'Britain welcomes Mr. Holland - Character analysis by newspaper', *The New Zealand Herald*, 3 January 1951.

¹³² McIntosh to Foss Shanahan, 22 August 1956, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 203.

¹³³ Eric Machting to British High Commissioners, 14 June 1946, TNA CAB 21/1798.

¹³⁴ Fifth meeting, 13 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

Commonwealth capitals was not successful in Wellington. British High Commissioner Patrick Duff observed that the talks were ‘a striking exhibition of how the ascendancy of personality affects the course and outcome of negotiations. Mr Fraser gathered momentum as he went on’. Yet Duff supposed that Fraser would wilt on a wider stage: ‘I have no doubt that when he come up against personalities of comparable scale such as our own cabinet, Nehru, and others, he will think again. I would not be surprised if in that company he “will roar you as gently as any sucking dove” ... he will roar you as “twere any nightingale”’.¹³⁵ In this respect, New Zealand provided a precursor to the British approach towards smaller states at later Conferences; noting their attitude carefully but assuming their stance will be moderated by the input of more senior members. Despite Duff’s prediction, Fraser was not timid at the 1949 Conference. Pearson recalled how Fraser ‘began to throw some more fat into the fire by asking the meeting in general and Nehru in particular to define what each meant by Commonwealth cooperation. Peter had been muttering for some days that he was determined to thrash out this matter, and he certainly did do this time’. It took the full gamut of Nehru’s rhetorical ability to rebut Fraser: ‘Nehru, who was put on the spot, made a brilliant reply, arguing that there could be no cooperation except for constructive and peaceful purposes, and that it was not enough to build up a Commonwealth defence bloc and hope to check communism that way. I have seldom listened to a more impressive dialectical statement’.¹³⁶

The episode suggested that New Zealand could have fulfilled a useful role at the Conferences if its leaders had been more dynamic: as their ultimate loyalty to Britain and the Commonwealth was never in question, they could have afforded to challenge specific topics more vigorously. Instead they usually contented themselves with banal contributions. While Fraser had espoused a greater industrial base for New Zealand, in both 1955 and 1956 Holland told the Conference

¹³⁵ Patrick Duff to Percivale Liesching, 25 March 1949, TNA CAB 21/1821.

¹³⁶ Pearson, notes on visit to London, April 19-30 1949, in Janice Cavell (ed.), *Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada: A History in Documents 1909-2009* (Ottawa, 2009), p. 145.

that spreading of fertiliser via aircraft to increase primary production was ‘the right way to develop the economy’.¹³⁷ This was doubtlessly good farming advice, but hardly constituted a five-year economic plan. Overall, New Zealand’s backing for the British line was taken for granted. A New Zealand press clipping on the 1964 Conference reported it as if it were a test match, commenting that Menzies and Holyoake ‘have not taken any major part in the discussions so far, but have given solid support to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the chairman’.¹³⁸ When tensions did emerge – such the establishment of the ANZUS alliance between Australia, New Zealand and the United States without including Britain – they were nothing which could not be solved by a dose of British hospitality. Churchill’s conclusion after a Chequers dinner with Menzies and Holland was that they ‘were a fine pair of chaps; they wouldn’t bring the Empire to any harm; their behaviour throughout the Conference had shown that they were excellent fellows; there was no need to worry about ANZUS’.¹³⁹ The last two examples included Australia alongside New Zealand, and were indicative of the tendency to assume that the two antipodean representatives thought as one. Yet this was not always the case. Even though both countries were enthusiastic supporters of collective Commonwealth defence, they quailed from working together on regional defence. Reporting on the 1944 Conference, Grant Dexter observed: ‘The one point on which New Zealanders are emphatic is that they will never enter into any binding regional arrangement with Australia’.¹⁴⁰ Another difference between the antipodeans was that Australian prime ministers were more assertive in exercising their direct right of access to their British counterpart. Even in the imperial era, Joseph Lyons got Chamberlain out of bed to answer his telephone call during the Munich summit.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Third meeting, 3 February 1955, TNA CAB 133/136; sixth meeting, 2 July 1956, TNA CAB 133/148.

¹³⁸ ‘Kenyatta Impresses Delegates - Personality of an Old Maori Chief’, Holyoake Papers, NLNZ, MS-1814-283/6.

¹³⁹ Corner to McIntosh, 11 December 1952, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁰ Grant Dexter, *The Commonwealth Conference* (Winnipeg, 1944), p. 14.

¹⁴¹ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, p. 287.

A possible explanation for the close relationship between Australian and British leaders is that for most of the period being examined their party allegiances aligned. Chifley had great admiration for Attlee and other British labour figures such as Stafford Cripps, declaring ‘they ought to have a monument 150 feet high to Cripps as the saviour of Britain’.¹⁴² This did not mean Chifley and his External Minister Evatt were overawed by their British equivalents. Their discussions were more like a rapid-fire debate amongst cabinet equals than reserved utterances between dominion and metropole. For instance, Frank Corner recorded the following exchange at the 1946 Conference:

Chifley: ‘I take it, Mr. Bevin, you’ve lost faith in UNO as an instrument for preserving the peace.’

Bevin: ‘I’m an old Trade Union man. I haven’t lost faith in conciliation but I like a damn good strike fund.’

Attlee: ‘We’ve made all sorts of concessions and they haven’t given us one thing.’

Bevin: ‘I thought we’d brought peace at Potsdam, and when I got to London I found I’d brought nothing.’

Evatt: ‘What principle is to be applied in making the Peace Treaties; preparing against the war with Russia, or Justice?’

Bevin: ‘I feel the same way about Russia as you feel about Japan.’

Evatt: ‘Japan is an enemy who tried to destroy us; Russia is our ally, and you have a treaty with her.’¹⁴³

Following this period of labour comradeship was thirteen years of British Conservative rule, which fell entirely within Menzies’ sixteen-year reign as Australian prime minister. Menzies became a sounding board for his hosts: Douglas-Home gave Menzies a complete copy of his speaking notes before the 1964 Conference so that they could work in tandem to keep discussion of Rhodesia to a minimum.¹⁴⁴ However Menzies also had to be carefully managed. After South Africa’s departure, Macmillan said to Australian High Commissioner Eric Harrison ‘you know Eric I am very worried about Bob. I think Bob has the idea that I let him down and I would not leave him with that impression for anything in the world’. Harrison’s response was blunt: ‘you know Harold, Bob has some reason for feeling that way, not only with regard to the

¹⁴² Crisp, *Chifley*, p. 277.

¹⁴³ Corner to McIntosh, 27 May 1946, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁴ Record of a Meeting between Douglas-Home and Menzies, 6 July 1964, TNA PREM 11/4633.

Prime Minister's Conference, where you seemed to bend over to satisfy Nehru and his colleagues'.¹⁴⁵ Macmillan responded by sending an eight page personal letter to Menzies, outlining his own fears for the future of the Commonwealth, and European civilisation as a whole.¹⁴⁶ After Wilson's victory in 1964, there was a party divide between the two countries, but this did not strain relations; on the contrary, the main problem was that Australian Liberal leaders were too eager to help. John Bunting, Secretary of the Australian Prime Minister's Department, warned Joe Garner before the September 1966 Conference that Holt was 'coming to London anxious to do everything possible to help you', but because his knowledge of Rhodesia was superficial, 'this very goodwill might in itself prove counter-productive unless you could spoon-feed Holt'. British officials agreed and briefed Wilson that 'Holt is a compulsive talker and Bunting hinted that, just as Bob Menzies used to speak very bluntly in his desire to help us and thereby often did a good deal of damage; so Holt ... might well do likewise unless we could persuade him to pipe down'.¹⁴⁷

What was particularly striking about Bunting's briefing is that he effectively asked Britain to 'spoon-feed' his own prime minister. This was emblematic of the common outlook of Commonwealth civil servants. The mode of administration which Britain had imparted – a cautious, apolitical civil service whose officers' tenure exceeded that of all but the most enduring politicians – was so entrenched that there seemed nothing untoward in a Secretary from one Commonwealth country briefing his British counterpart on how to handle his own political masters. The greatest threat to this bureaucratic hegemony was a prime minister who spoke his mind without revealing it to his advisors beforehand. In this respect Diefenbaker was dangerous. His innate indecisiveness was abetted by a feeling his Department of External

¹⁴⁵ Harrison to Menzies, 16 May 1961, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 1, folder 122.

¹⁴⁶ Macmillan to Menzies, 8 February 1962, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 1, box 22, folder 183.

¹⁴⁷ Gordon Walker to Wilson, 4 September 1966, TNA PREM 13/782.

Affairs was a Liberal fiefdom, filled with what he dubbed 'Personalties'.¹⁴⁸ This was not an unfounded fear, given that Pearson had served in the Department for twenty years before becoming its minister for another nine. In addition, Diefenbaker was vulnerable to being swayed by a sense of place over the word of his advisors. Basil Robinson recorded that 'A dimension of the man has survived from childhood – a sense of excited wonder – and it emerged afresh whenever he revisited the sacred places, Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, No. 10 Downing Street and the Mansion House'.¹⁴⁹ Intoxicated by London's splendour, Diefenbaker returned from the 1957 Conference and declared that fifteen per cent of Canada's exports would be diverted from the United States to Britain: an unenforceable pledge, unsought by Britain and undisclosed to anyone beforehand.¹⁵⁰ With the exception of Diefenbaker's anglophilia, Canadian prime ministers were fairly reliable in their Commonwealth outlook: respectful of British precedents and policy, but also uniquely detached from them by virtue of being outside the sterling area and having their primary defence commitments codified in NATO. Longevity may again have been a factor in this consistency. When Mackenzie King retired, he asked for Attlee's advice as to 'the present practice in the United Kingdom' for swearing in a new leader.¹⁵¹ King had been prime minister for so long that Canadian officials had forgotten how to install a new one. An example of Canada's detached manner was the 1969 Conference, to which Pierre Trudeau arrived expecting to act as a mediator between Britain and the Africans on Rhodesia.¹⁵² When he was not called upon in this capacity, he instead made headlines for his 'social gyrations around and outside London, his girlfriends, his clothes'.¹⁵³ On his return to Ottawa, Trudeau was denounced by the acting leader of the New Democratic Party for exhibiting an attitude of

¹⁴⁸ Patricia McMahon, *Essence of Indecision: Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963* (Montreal, 2009), p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁰ Stuart Ward, 'Worlds Apart: Three 'British' Prime Ministers at Empire's End', in Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005), p. 402.

¹⁵¹ King to Norman Robertson, 14 November 1948, 'King 1948: Robertson - Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations', LAC MG26-J1, volume 442, microfilm reel C-11051.

¹⁵² 'Prime Ministers' Conference: Nottage's Notes on Discussions on Rhodesia', ANZ ABHS 950 W4627/3702, PM 153/54/1.

¹⁵³ Dean Eyre, New Zealand High Commissioner, Canada to George Laking, 22 January 1969, *ibid.*

‘uncommitted dilettantism’ towards the Conference.¹⁵⁴ Robert Stanfield, the leader of the Progressive Conservatives, declared that ‘never in the history of the Commonwealth has Canada made a contribution less important and less useful’.¹⁵⁵ This may have been partisan invective, but Trudeau had given his opponents ample material. During a reception at Lancaster House, ‘he found the magnificent curving banister irresistible. With a cry of ‘ole!’ he jumped on it and slid down into view of the journalists below’.¹⁵⁶ Trudeau had attempted to defend his lack of impact on the 1969 Conference by noting he was a ‘new boy’, but Stanfield rebuffed this, saying ‘he may be a new boy with the Commonwealth but Canada is not’.¹⁵⁷

It is telling that Stanfield’s attack centred on Canada’s historic contribution to the Commonwealth. Canadian prime ministers prided themselves on being a bridge between the old and new Commonwealth and positioning Canada as co-creator of the Commonwealth, being the second largest source of aid and providing the first Secretary-General. This proved useful in the aftermath of Rhodesian UDI: Arnold Smith managed to convince Nyerere not to withdraw from the Commonwealth, arguing ‘we in Canada believe we invented it and that it is at least as much ours as the British – and we would take withdrawal as a personal affront’.¹⁵⁸ Sometimes Canada’s self-identification as a post-colonial power was less convincing. Gordon Robertson, Secretary of the Canadian Privy Council Office under St Laurent, tried to argue that ‘As the leader of a people who had, like the new Commonwealth, been conquered by Britain, St Laurent could speak to their prime ministers and presidents in a way that no other members of the Commonwealth Conferences could’.¹⁵⁹ It was unlikely that new Commonwealth leaders would see strong parallels between the plight of French Canadians and their own national

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Trevor McDonald, *The Queen and the Commonwealth* (London, 1986), p. 113.

¹⁵⁷ Dean Eyre to George Laking, 22 January 1969, ANZ ABHS 950 W4627/3702, PM 153/54/1.

¹⁵⁸ Phillip Buckner, ‘Canada and the End of Empire 1939-1982’, in Phillip Buckner (ed.), *Canada and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2008), p. 121.

¹⁵⁹ Gordon Robertson, *Memoirs of a Very Civil Servant* (Toronto, 2001), p. 60,

struggles. A possible exception was in the Caribbean where the British had often supplanted previous European colonists, and where Canada focused many of its aid programmes. Eric Williams' first address to a Prime Ministers' Conference was noticeably familial, as if the Conference was a family reunion rather than the fulfilment of independence. He said; 'It is a great honour for Trinidad and Tobago, as the youngest members of the expanding Commonwealth family, to join with its older sister, Canada, in expressing our appreciation of the welcome extended to us this morning by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and to state how happy we are at this get together in London'.¹⁶⁰

Williams' opening words in 1962 had echoes of Nkrumah's extraordinary speech at a dinner in his honour at the conclusion of his debut Conference in 1957. He declared that: 'we think we have been good children of England while we were a colony and I hope – and, please, I don't want to be quoted – I hope we shall go on being good children'.¹⁶¹ Far from being concerned about lacking influence in post-independence Accra, Nkrumah's speech made the CRO worry that it would have too much say. Arthur Snelling wrote: 'we may be saddled, despite our wishes and our best endeavours, with a degree of responsibility for thinking about Ghana's interests which we would far rather be without'.¹⁶² Nkrumah's 'good children' remarks were a reminder of high esteem in which British values were held in the Commonwealth before the twin traumas of disagreement on the EEC and Rhodesia – although even at the January 1966 Conference after UDI, the Ceylonese representative asked 'Was British justice not to be fought for?'.¹⁶³ Despite the Canadian claim to be the oldest of the Commonwealth's 'national liberation movements', it was Britain to which inaugural leaders looked to for their prime ministerial mannerisms.¹⁶⁴ Snelling congratulated his own Office for Nkrumah's performance in 1957,

¹⁶⁰ 'Speech for Opening of Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference 1962', EWMC MS 737.

¹⁶¹ Snelling to McLennan, 15 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6191.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ 'Wednesday 12 January 1966 - Morning session', ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/143, LONB 65/3/1.

¹⁶⁴ Buckner, 'Introduction' in Buckner and Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World*, p. 19.

writing that ‘his interventions were simple and to the point. The Commonwealth Relations Office can to some extent take credit for this, since Chapman ... came around before his prime minister arrived, to ask for material for guidance as to what Dr Nkrumah should say!’.¹⁶⁵ Conversely, Snelling noted that Nkrumah was ‘not greatly impressed’ by Nehru, asserting that Nkrumah’s ‘easy going West African cynicism and sense of political reality reacted unfavourably, we hear, to Mr. Nehru’s highly moral lectures’.¹⁶⁶

Britain’s honeymoon period of influence over Nkrumah may have simply been a function of the relatively gradual pace of Ghanaian decolonisation; he was a familiar figure, having served as Prime Minister for five years before independence. Moreover, while African leaders remained few in number, Britain could be personally attentive. In 1962 Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys sent Nkrumah a croquet set, recalling that ‘When we last met at Accra, you said you were thinking of laying out a croquet lawn in your garden at Flagstaff House’.¹⁶⁷ There could be no clearer demonstration of soft power than diplomacy by mallet. Britain could also draw upon a great reservoir of affection for its young Queen. The construct of the Head of the Commonwealth emphasised a personal rather than institutional relationship with the monarch. Yet many new leaders sought public honours in addition to private audiences. Mazuri noted that by 1967 independent Commonwealth Africa had seen ‘four knighted prime ministers, one knighted regional premier, one knighted president and one knighted vice president’.¹⁶⁸ Such eagerness to receive the imprimatur of the former imperial power could be attributed to a desire to accrue as many accolades as possible following independence. After all, Nkrumah harked back to a much older empire in order to impose himself instead of the Queen on Ghanaian coinage, which rendered him as *Civitas Gbaniensis Conditor* – Latin for ‘Founder of the State of

¹⁶⁵ Snelling to McLennan, 15 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6191.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Sandys to Nkrumah, 27 February 1962, PRAAD RG 17/1/74.

¹⁶⁸ Mazuri, *The Anglo-African Commonwealth*, p. 99.

Ghana'.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it is difficult not to conclude that Britain squandered an opportunity to build upon the latent identification with British institutions and ideals which so many inaugural leaders possessed. Balewa was so enamoured of Britain that he granted £40,000 towards the building of the British High Commission in Lagos.¹⁷⁰ Expatriate advisors were employed well after independence. Pakistan had four Britons as Air Force chief before a local was first appointed in 1957. In 1960 Snelling observed that Nyerere 'welcomes white men in Africa in every capacity except that of Governors'.¹⁷¹ On occasion Britain had stronger objections to the participation of expatriates in post-independence administrations than the new Commonwealth did. Nkrumah made former Labour MP Geoffrey Bing Ghana's first Attorney-General, to the dismay of Snelling, who declared before the 1957 Conference that 'by hook or by crook, we must assure that Mr Bing does not accompany Dr Nkrumah'.¹⁷²

Another unexploited asset which Britain possessed was the commonality of English amongst the prime ministers. The Conferences may have been multiracial but they remained monolingual. In 1965 Pearson joked that he was the first to ever use French at the Conference table: 'We were talking about some sort of Commonwealth voluntary service, and I said ... in Canada now that we had "la compagnie des jeunes canadiens" and they all looked up'.¹⁷³ One of the main reasons members hesitated to accept Cyprus as a member – uniquely, its application was still pending when it gained independence – was that Archbishop Makarios did not speak English fluently.¹⁷⁴ The informality facilitated by shared language was never threatened even during the rapid growth of the 1960s, which brought with it Nyerere, who had translated *Julius Caesar* into Swahili, and Eric Williams, who wrote five academic monographs whilst in office.

¹⁶⁹ State Publishing Corporation, *What was wrong with Nkrumah* (Accra, 1967).

¹⁷⁰ Olajide Aluko, *Ghana and Nigeria, 1957-70: A study in Inter-African Discord* (London, 1976), p. 174.

¹⁷¹ Snelling to Home, 19 April 1960, TNA PREM 11/2909.

¹⁷² Snelling to Chadwick, 12 March 1957, TNA DO 35/5173.

¹⁷³ Briefing, 21 June 1965, 'Canadian Papers Prepared for Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, R5276-62-X-E.

¹⁷⁴ A.F. Madden (ed.), *The End of Empire: Dependencies since 1948* (London, 2000), p. 47.

The confidence each leader had working in English should have given the Commonwealth an advantage over almost every other international grouping. For instance, the OAU made ceaseless calls for African unity but tangible steps were frustrated by linguistic divides. A key component of Nkrumah's short-lived Ghana-Guinea Union was having a Guinean representative attend his cabinet, but the gesture was undercut by the fact the Guinean spoke no English.¹⁷⁵ The Commonwealth had a common language, extensive use of common law and a widespread reserve currency, but Britain tended to underestimate the comprehension of its newer visitors. For example, during the 1955 Conference the Treasury planned individual meetings for the Chancellor with Menzies, Nehru and Kotelawala. Menzies was scheduled in for 'a preliminary word on tariff and GATT questions before the economic review session of the Conference'; the implication being that Britain and Australia met as equals and could collaborate on a common line to present to other members. Nehru was down for 'a word about the effect of Indian financial policy on the climate for foreign investment', which carried a hint of Britain lobbying in the interests of the City. Kotelawala was slated in for 'a cautionary word about the potting up of gold and dollars', as if he needed the rudiments of the sterling area explained to him.¹⁷⁶ The brief for the meeting with Kotelawala used simplistic metaphors, as it was claimed that Ceylon's finance minister was 'clearly inexperienced'.¹⁷⁷ It recommended reminding Kotelawala that 'the day may well come when Ceylon will again need help from outside ... but the prospects for such help will be poor if in the meantime she has alienated her friends'.¹⁷⁸ Adopting a patronising tone towards Ceylon was unhelpful, especially as Kotelawala was replaced shortly after by Solomon Bandaranaike, an erudite barrister who had complained that Anthony Eden's parties had disrupted his study when they were both at Christ Church.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Peregrine Worsthorne, 'Offer on Sovereignty', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 8 January 1960, PRAAD RG 17/1/202.

¹⁷⁶ I.P. Bancroft to Macaulay, 25 January 1955, in TNA T 236/3853.

¹⁷⁷ W. Armstrong to Leslie Rowan, 31 January 1955, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ 'One of the family: Ceylon's Prime Minister', *Observer*, 24 June 1956.

Bandaranaike epitomised the breadth of talent many new Commonwealth leaders possessed. He was so comfortable in an English environment that he was elected Secretary and Treasurer of the Oxford Union, but he was also a strident nationalist who enshrined Sinhalese as the official language over English. He was also the first Ceylonese prime minister to call for Britain to vacate its military bases in Ceylon. Bandaranaike's family had been chief advisors to the Governor for generations – his middle names came from Governor Joseph West Ridgeway, who was also his godfather – yet in his thirties he abandoned western dress and the Anglicanism he had been raised in.¹⁸⁰ In short, he was fully equipped for the clubbish atmosphere of the Conferences, but was also an authentic anti-colonialist. Several leaders could even boast of graduating from gaol to government; Banda, Bustamante, Kaunda, Kenyatta and Nehru were all former political prisoners as well as inaugural leaders. Nehru could combine his understanding of the British establishment from eight years at Harrow, Cambridge and the Inner Temple with a lived experience of imperial oppression through a decade of imprisonment. When discussing possible Indian relationships with the crown at the 1949 Conference, Cripps exclaimed 'Pandit Nehru, you have an extraordinary grasp of this subject', to which Nehru replied 'Yes, Sir Stafford, I had over ten years in British gaols in think it through'.¹⁸¹ Old Commonwealth leaders could not compete for the moral high ground occupied by former inmates of colonial gaols. Banda, who uniquely amongst African members backed the British line on Rhodesia, nonetheless invoked his anti-colonial credentials by reminding Wilson at the 1965 Conference that 'I wasn't afraid of your government and I fought you'. Wilson's only reply was that it was not his government which Banda had fought.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ S. Morley Scott, Canadian High Commissioner, Pakistan, to Department of External Affairs, 6 June 1956, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1956', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4776, file 50085-F-40.

¹⁸¹ Crisp, *Chifley*, p. 278.

¹⁸² Charles Craw, 'Notes on Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 18 June 1965', ANZ ABHS 22310 W5631/245, PAR 323/3/1.

The exchange epitomised the challenge facing British prime ministers in the 1960s. Many of the new members were well-educated multi-linguists, who had overwhelming domestic popularity as founding-fathers. Some headed one-party states, and were not answerable to public opinion at all. In contrast British prime ministers were constrained by an electorate which was increasingly sceptical of the value of the Commonwealth. Wilson's response was to be candid about his political position. Just as he reminded Banda in 1964 that he was gaoled by a Conservative-designed Rhodesian Federation which Labour had opposed, Wilson warned Kaunda in 1969 that Ian Smith was holding out for a change of government in Britain: only Labour could prevent a 'sell out'.¹⁸³ In Lagos, Wilson told the January 1966 Conference that there was 'no guarantee that Rhodesian armed forces and the police will lay down their arms at the sight of the British flag'; the unspoken corollary was that a British government would find it difficult to survive if British troops died in action against Rhodesia.¹⁸⁴ This much was accepted at the 1969 Conference, when the Tunku conceded that the British refusal to use force 'was understandable because the British public would not allow it against their kith and kin ... Although Mr. Wilson had not said this in so many words he was saying it for him'.¹⁸⁵ Wilson's invocation of practical politics raised the ire of New Zealand – in 1965 its External Affairs Ministry Secretary Alister McIntosh complained that Wilson used the Commonwealth 'for personal and domestic purposes' – but this was a dated view, as if the British Prime Minister, alone among Commonwealth leaders, had to prioritise it over domestic politics.¹⁸⁶ Rather, by drawing attention to political limitations such as his thin parliamentary majority – down to just two at the time of the Lagos Conference – Wilson arguably furthered the 'normalisation' of Commonwealth relationships. This was essential, as Britain's pre-eminence had begun to unravel. Previously, Britain had relied upon its provision of aid and its detailed knowledge of

¹⁸³ 'Record of Conversation between Wilson and President of Zambia', 8 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2540.

¹⁸⁴ 'Tuesday 11 January 1966 morning session', ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/143, LONB 65/3/1.

¹⁸⁵ Seventh meeting, 10 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539.

¹⁸⁶ 'Notes for Talk to Division Heads', 12 July 1965, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-157.

local conditions to influence visiting prime ministers. At the 1962 Conference, however, Williams sensationally rejected a package of British loans and grants intended to accompany Trinidadian independence. Not only was he the first prime minister to reject the ‘parting gift’, he also published the correspondence with Macmillan on the subject in a major violation of Commonwealth norms.¹⁸⁷ In Africa, Britain had to compete with the inflow of funds from Israeli, Soviet and West German governments, amongst others, seeking commercial and diplomatic gains. On an individual level, the personal touch which British prime ministers had been able to add to Commonwealth relations became less astute. The predilections of long-serving leaders were well known – the Tunku was greatly pleased by the gift of a golf putter in 1965, and Wilson personalised his invitation to the 1969 Conference by adding ‘we may be able to lay on for you some good golfing weather’.¹⁸⁸ However, Wilson found himself increasingly caught out on the details of leaders of smaller states. When he asked Lesotho Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan about his relationship with the King of Lesotho, he was surprised to learn that the monarch was Jonathan’s grand-nephew. The King had proposed abdicating and entering politics, but Jonathan declared ‘if he does I will smash him’, startling Wilson further.¹⁸⁹

While it was perhaps unreasonable to expect Wilson to know the intricacies of family politics in Lesotho, the fact remained that the knowledge gap between Britain and the newer members was growing as the Commonwealth swelled to thirty in 1969 – six times the size in 1944. Nor had the other old Commonwealth prime ministers done much to increase their awareness of their new Commonwealth colleagues. In 1965 Nkrumah offered to pay for Menzies to visit Ghana, who had promised to visit back in 1960.¹⁹⁰ Pearson flippantly told Canadian journalists that ‘he might ask Nkrumah to pay for his too, or chalk it up against the educational section of

¹⁸⁷ Colin Palmer, *Eric Williams and The Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), p. 150.

¹⁸⁸ Wilson to prime ministers, 7 August 1968, TNA CAB 164/413.

¹⁸⁹ Palliser to D.J.D. Maitland, 16 January 1969, in PREM 13/2540.

¹⁹⁰ George Drew to Department of External Affairs, 29 March 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, 50085-H-40.

external aid!'.¹⁹¹ It was clear that Africa was still being left off prime ministerial itineraries. Commonwealth connections remained stubbornly bilateral, retaining a 'hub and spoke' model centred on each leader's relationship with Britain, although sometimes unlikely pairings would emerge. Holyoake got on famously with Kenyatta at the 1964 Conference because they were both former tobacco farmers, with a member of the New Zealand delegation telling the press that 'there have been more laughs at this conference than at any of those I can remember in the past'.¹⁹² However, laughter could still carry a trace of condescension. Kenyatta was described as having the 'personality of an old Maori chief' at a time when Maori land rights were being reduced and Maori players withdrawn from rugby matches against South Africa. In a similar way, old Commonwealth briefs on new Commonwealth leaders often honed in on biographical minutiae rather than their policy outlook. For instance the 1964 Canadian brief on Kenyatta recorded that for some years he shared a London flat with the singer Paul Robeson.¹⁹³ Such idiosyncratic detail may have been useful for small talk, but it was markedly more trivial than the briefs on more senior members. On other occasions assessments were too lenient; the Canadian brief on Nyerere stated 'If he has failings they are connected with lack of political strength and ruthlessness – the phrase too nice for politics is frequently used to describe him'.¹⁹⁴ This was an oddly gentle depiction of the ruler of a one-party state who had just enacted a merger with Zanzibar in the wake of a violent revolution. Only when leaders of new countries were judged as harshly as those from old ones could it be genuinely said that Commonwealth members were equal. Interestingly, it took the prime minister of one of the newest, smallest states to speak truth to the large African powers. At the 1969 Conference Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore declared that the Biafran war was weakening the moral case for majority rule in

¹⁹¹ Briefing, 21 June 1965, 'Canadian Papers Prepared for Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, R5276-62-X-E.

¹⁹² 'Kenyatta Impresses Delegates - Personality of an Old Maori Chief', Holyoake Papers, NLNZ MS-1814-283/6.

¹⁹³ 'Introductions: Delegations from Member Countries of the Commonwealth', 29 June 1964, 'Canadian Papers Prepared for Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference', LAC MG31-E47, volume 66, R5276-62-X-E.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Rhodesia: ‘the case of bigotry and injustice to the black and coloured peoples was being greatly assisted by such instances of the African’s inhumanity to his fellow African’.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, Lee called into question the ‘whiggish’ view of decolonisation as an unalloyed positive, observing that:

There was a tendency to take for granted that the trend in history which had started with India, and of which the meeting was an example, would continue indefinitely towards the betterment of man. Few of them could honestly say that independence had brought greater satisfaction in the economic or even the spiritual spheres for most of the people for whom the independence had been intended.¹⁹⁶

Lee’s interventions injected a healthy dose of realism into proceedings. For decades the Commonwealth had operated on a basis encapsulated by Nehru after the 1949 Conference: ‘it is better to keep a cooperative association going which may do good in this world rather than break it’.¹⁹⁷ Under such a framework, ensuring the continuation of the grouping outweighed the need for tangible outcomes. Lee took a more mercantile view. He argued that leaders needed to refocus on creating value from the Commonwealth by establishing ‘cross-wise links’ between them. The Commonwealth could not rely indefinitely on British ‘hospitality’, given that ‘yielding to the sentiments of former wards had become for Britain an unprofitable and irritating exercise in futility’.¹⁹⁸ Such pragmatism was lauded by Wilson, who had enthused about Lee even before the 1969 Conference, adding a personal note to his invitation: ‘We all need the unique contribution that you can make. I so look forward to seeing you again’.¹⁹⁹ Thus, when Wilson indicated that he saw no need for Britain to host the next Conference, it was unsurprising that the role fell to Lee. The 1971 CHOGM was dominated by debate over British sales of arms to South Africa. Ted Heath could either make profitable sales and fulfil treaty obligations to South Africa, or yield to the moral outrage of the new Commonwealth. In effect Heath did both, but

¹⁹⁵ Eighth meeting, 10 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539.

¹⁹⁶ Second meeting, 7 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539.

¹⁹⁷ Nicholas Mansergh (ed.), *Documents and Speeches on British Commonwealth Affairs, 1931-1952* (Oxford, 1953), p. 847.

¹⁹⁸ Eighth meeting, 10 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539.

¹⁹⁹ Wilson to prime ministers, 7 August 1968, TNA CAB 164/413.

unsatisfactorily; selling enough helicopters and spare parts to irritate the new Commonwealth, but not enough to satisfy his Conservative Party. The 1971 meeting also represented somewhat of a defeat for Lee. In 1969 he argued it ‘was essential to get away from the UN atmosphere and refrain from “putting in a plug”’, but as host he was unable to stop leaders reading out interminable prepared statements, prompting Trudeau to facetiously say he would simply file his with the Secretary-General to save time.²⁰⁰ The change in host country had not been enough to divert the Commonwealth from another ‘exercise in futility’; leaders managed to keep the association going, but did little to increase its value.

Heath’s experience in Singapore echoed Wilson’s in Lagos, where he complained that Sierra Leonean Prime Minister Albert Margai was ‘calling for gunboat diplomacy when he had not even got one gunboat’.²⁰¹ This pointed to a central problem as the Conferences expanded. The number of voices urging action increased, but the number of leaders prepared to commit military aid or economic assistance remained static, or even declined. Gorton told Wilson that Australia would not send troops if Britain used force in Rhodesia, dubbing it an ‘excellent example’ of the fact Australia no longer automatically followed the British line. Gorton even suggested that ‘it was rational for Australia to regard Britain as a foreign country’ and that there was no longer a ‘special relationship’ between the two countries.²⁰² This could be seen as a failure of the entire Commonwealth project. The ideal of treating countries as ‘not foreign’ by emphasising personal contact had surely failed if two of the oldest members denied having any special connection. Yet it should instead be taken as an example of how relations changed based on the personalities involved. Less than three years earlier Holt had intervened to ensure Holyoake attended the September 1966 Conference because ‘Britain would need all her friends

²⁰⁰ Second meeting, 7 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2539; Barney Danson, *Not Bad for a Sergeant: The Memoirs of Barney Danson* (Toronto, 2002), p. 130.

²⁰¹ Bing, *Reap the Whirlwind*, p. 417.

²⁰² ‘Record of conversation between the Prime Minister and Prime Minister of Australia’, 7 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2540.

at the meetings'.²⁰³ While in 1969 Gorton told Wilson that 'we hate and detest sanctions', a decade later the situation had been reversed; Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser urged the extensions of sanctions to South Africa while Margaret Thatcher stoutly resisted at the 1979 CHOGM in Lusaka.²⁰⁴ In short, Gorton's blunt assessment of the Anglo-Australian relationship did not herald the dissolution of Commonwealth ties. Rather, it was a sign of a change in the balance of power in the Commonwealth.

For the bulk of the period being examined, the most important relationships were those between old Commonwealth members. However, with the rapid increase in numbers in the 1960s, relationships could not be so closely managed by Britain and dynamic figures emerged from many continents, such as Nyerere, Williams and Lee. Furthermore, many inaugural leaders were long-lived: Kaunda and Lee served into the 1990s. Much like colonial leaders being upgraded to prime ministers from being premiers and chief ministers, the rise of the new Commonwealth had brought a host of new titles to the table. Makarios had the honorific 'His Beatitude'.²⁰⁵ Nkrumah went one further by styling himself *Osagyefo*, meaning 'redeemer'.²⁰⁶ Nonetheless, even after the inelegant acronym CHOGM was brought in to cover every type of title, there was still clear continuity from the Prime Ministers' Conferences. Stephen Chan observed that Nyerere's retirement in 1985 still left Kaunda in the 'inner cabinet' of senior Commonwealth leaders.²⁰⁷ The very fact that it was possible to speak of an inner cabinet suggested that even after decades of participation by executive presidents – and the addition of micro-nations raising the membership numbers to nearly fifty – personal relationships still mattered. It was telling that the body established to report on sanctions against South Africa in

²⁰³ 'Record of conversation between the Prime Minister and Prime Minister of Australia', 5 September 1966, TNA PREM 13/782.

²⁰⁴ Palliser to Mackilligin, 7 January 1969, TNA PREM 13/2540.

²⁰⁵ Danson, *Not Bad for a Sergeant*, p. 128.

²⁰⁶ Robert H. Jackson and Carl Gustav Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 201.

²⁰⁷ Stephen Chan, *Twelve Years of Commonwealth Diplomatic History: Commonwealth Summit Meetings, 1979-1991* (Lewiston, 1992), p. 117.

1985 was called the 'Eminent Persons Group' and included several former prime ministers – even as the Commonwealth became more institutional, it continued to emphasise individuals over nations. This arguably deferred questions regarding the Commonwealth's continued relevance - until the early 1990s it could point to the attendance of inaugural national leaders such as Kaunda and Lee as reminders of its role as a vehicle for decolonisation. The 1995 and 1997 CHOGMs had their profile raised by the presence of inaugural post-apartheid President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, while South Africa hosted the 1999 CHOGM, in a further reminder of the Commonwealth's role in ending apartheid. Only in the 2000s, once the last of the first-generation leaders had retired, could it be asked whether the Commonwealth was a useful tool of transition during the end of Empire, or whether it had an ongoing role.

Chapter Five:

Publicity and Audience

‘FOR QUEEN AND COMMONWEALTH’

These words lay under the royal arms on the front page of every issue of London’s *Daily Mail* until late 1968, succeeding the motto ‘For King and Empire’ which adorned the masthead during the Second World War.¹ It could be argued that such a statement was an anachronism rather than a credo, much like royal arms and titles which continued to claim France for centuries after the end of English rule. Yet the updating of the banner to ‘For King and Commonwealth’ in the early 1950s, and its ultimate removal on the eve of the 1969 Prime Ministers’ Conference, suggested that the phrase was not simply a relic. Both actions reflect the evolution of British identity. That Commonwealth displaced Empire in the *Mail*’s phraseology before the end of George VI’s reign indicated that Commonwealth was not just being used as a sort of feminised synonym for Empire to accompany the accession of a young Queen. It signified the pervasiveness of post-war optimism for the Commonwealth ideal, through which British prestige would be sustained via a peaceful transfer of power. Likewise, the omission of the motto, right at the end of the period this thesis examines, symbolised the failure of that project. It implied that the Commonwealth no longer lent even rhetorical lustre to Britain’s status. Its deletion allowed the *Daily Mail* to sharpen its accusation that the Conferences were futile. Its editorial at the conclusion of the 1969 Conference presciently called for the Conferences to become a ‘travelling circus’ visiting other Commonwealth capitals because ‘We need a respite to wipe the rotten egg off our faces’.² Nonetheless, until the motto was omitted,

¹ ‘The press and the prime ministers: Fleet Street in search of the Empire’, *Round Table*, 59:235 (1969), p. 278.

² ‘The circus leaves town’, *Daily Mail*, *ibid.*

every edition of the *Daily Mail* proclaimed to its millions of readers, at least subconsciously, that the Commonwealth was as integral to British identity as the Queen herself. Likewise, the Conferences signalled the significance of the Commonwealth to the general public in a way which could be adapted to suit audiences in the old and new Commonwealth as well as in Britain. For instance, the newsreels depicting newly independent African leaders arriving at Marlborough House, with flags fluttering on the bonnet of their Rolls-Royces, could be interpreted in Britain as a marker of a peaceful transition to leaders comfortable with British norms, while in the new Commonwealth the same footage could epitomise their full emergence onto the world stage after a long history of colonial oppression. Upon arrival white officers saluted and opened doors for black leaders; a visual reversal, albeit a momentary one, after generations of black subjects serving white colonial governors.³ As the meetings themselves occurred in private, individual prime ministers could present their own narrative through briefings and press conferences to suit their domestic political needs. Conversely, as the meetings occurred in London, the world's most competitive press environment, leaders were subject to greater scrutiny than they were accustomed to at home, and continued British influence over press agencies and publications in the new Commonwealth meant such scrutiny could be disseminated globally. Furthermore, in a cold war milieu where the balance between global blocs was a persistent issue, the Conferences were closely watched by foreign newspapers and governments. This chapter will examine how the hosts and visiting delegations utilised the press – sometimes adroitly, often amateurishly – to position the Conferences as a high-profile international event, pivotal to perceptions of the Commonwealth. It will be primarily concerned with how the Conferences were depicted to the British public, but will also consider how the Conferences were depicted in foreign newspapers as well as elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

³ 'Arrival of Commonwealth Ministers for Conference at Marlborough House', British Pathé film 3064.11, 1962, accessed 8 March 2016, at <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/arrival-of-commonwealth-ministers-for-conference-a>

There has been a vigorous historiographical debate as to how the Empire was envisaged by its subjects, both in the metropole and periphery. Bernard Porter's *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* contends that even at its zenith, the Empire had only a marginal impact on the average Briton, and even Westminster was less concerned with imperial policy than was typically assumed.⁴ Conversely, David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism* asserts that the iconography of Empire did make an impression upon the British people, especially in the 'domestication of the exotic' – taking foreign chieftains, cultures and commodities and making them comprehensible for a British audience by incorporating them into an imperial hierarchy.⁵ This project was not confined to Britain. James Belich argues that New Zealanders chose to be 'recolonised' by enthusiastically positioning themselves as 'Better Britons', importing British culture wholesale in exchange for serving as Britain's dairy and shearing shed.⁶ The debate is complicated further by the term Commonwealth – if it is difficult to discern the extent to which Empire permeated the average household, it is even more complex to ascertain what people understood the Commonwealth to be. This is because the Empire had no definite end and the Commonwealth had no clear foundation date. The result was what Mansergh described as 'psychological carry-over' between the two.⁷ Ambiguity was inevitable, but was heightened by the concentration on what Mansergh described as the 'continuity element'.⁸ There was never a formal declaration of the end of Empire. The closest Ronald Hyam could identify, at least from a Conservative government, was Sandys' statement during the 1964 Conference that: 'we have no desire to prolong our colonial obligations for a day longer than is necessary'.⁹ Shortly before its demise, the Colonial Office considered whether a 'general act of decolonisation' could be made by 1965, but this was

⁴ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), p. 16.

⁵ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London, 2001), p. xix.

⁶ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland, 2001), p. 84.

⁷ Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London, 1969), p. 403.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 262.

deemed unwise.¹⁰ Thus, in the absence of a public declaration, the conversion of Empire into Commonwealth depended upon what paper you read. The *Times* continued to style its overseas pages as ‘imperial and foreign news’ until 1960.¹¹ The *Mail* may have omitted the Empire from the masthead by 1951, but the term enjoyed a partial revival at the dawn of the second Elizabethan Age. An editorial on the Commonwealth Economic Conference in December 1952 produced a late burst of race patriotism: ‘From the fog and murk of London in December comes a bright and golden vision of what it is possible for this Imperial race still to accomplish’. The Conference was an ad hoc meeting of prime ministers and finance ministers called to shore up international confidence in sterling, but the *Mail* saw in it a framework for imperial unity: ‘We have waited overlong for this historic moment – about 300 years’.¹² The *Express* went further, with a headline promising ‘CASH! and FOOD! and Work!’. It dubbed the communiqué as ‘the prospectus the directors of the Empire company have drawn up at their board meeting in London – the Empire Economic Conference’.¹³ The wishful rendering of Commonwealth leaders as directors of the ‘Empire company’ by the *Express* draws out another reason for ambiguity over the end of Empire; some mastheads wilfully ignored government attempts to abandon imperial lexicon. The *Express* scorned the omission of ‘British’ from ‘British Commonwealth’ after the first paragraph of the 1949 London Declaration, adopting the headline ‘Britain bans British: Attlee’s title now premier of the UK, “dominion” goes too’.¹⁴

The only way to ward off the imperial hankerings of portions of the British press would have been a public repudiation of Empire, but this would have been politically impossible for either major party at any stage during the period. Macmillan told the National Union of Conservatives in

¹⁰ Ronald Hyam and William Roger Louis (eds), *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1957-1964* (London, 2000), p. xli.

¹¹ ‘Press Cuttings - Macmillan’s Tour & General News’, PRAAD, RG 17/1/202.

¹² ‘We can win if we try’, *Daily Mail*, 10 December 1952, Holland Papers, NLNZ MSY-1034.

¹³ ‘CASH! And FOOD! and Work!’, *Daily Express*, 9 December 1952, *ibid.*

¹⁴ ‘Britain bans British: Attlee’s title now premier of the UK, ‘dominion’ goes too’, *Daily Express*, 22 January 1949, TNA DO 35/2255.

1960 that the Conferences would enable Britain to ‘speak – and I hope lead – not merely from her own position as a single island but ... as the heart and soul of the Commonwealth’.¹⁵ In 1965 Harold Wilson infamously declared that ‘Britain’s frontiers are on the Himalayas’.¹⁶ The alternative to admitting to the dissolution of the Empire was to present the Commonwealth in a way which made it, in Cannadine’s words, the ‘preordained and triumphant ending of the empire story’.¹⁷ Macmillan adopted such a tone in the early stages of his prime ministership. At the end of the 1957 Conference he made a televised address to the nation, extolling Britain’s achievement in granting independence to its colonies: ‘one by one countries under our guardianship take up the responsibility of full nationhood ... surely we’re entitled to take a little credit for all this? Such a thing, you know, has never happened before in history’.¹⁸ In this narrative of self-congratulation, the Conferences served as a sort of homecoming: ‘in our everyday life the family means a great deal to us at home. But I think sometimes it means even more, when the members of the family are scattered all over the world. Then family reunions have a deeper meaning. The family reunion that we have just held ends on a note of confidence and faith’.¹⁹ This address captured the dichotomy inherent in post-war Commonwealth idealism; the transition was apparently so significant as to be unprecedented in history, but the actual extent of continued unity was left unclear; it was sufficient to have ‘confidence and faith’. It was a fine example of Max Beloff’s view as described by W.D. McIntyre in *The Significance of the Commonwealth*; successive British governments were ‘so concerned to maintain the Commonwealth that they had been prepared to sacrifice its vital elements whilst at the same time they had adopted a vocabulary to conceal what was happening’.²⁰ A key part of this

¹⁵ Canadian High Commission, London to Department of External Affairs, 22 March 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, part 2, 50085-H-40.

¹⁶ Philip Murphy, ‘Britain as a Global Power in the Twentieth Century’ in Andrew Thompson (ed.), *Britain’s Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2012), p. 64.

¹⁷ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, p. xv.

¹⁸ ‘Britain’s policy is to put the Commonwealth first’, *Guardian*, 8 July 1957, in ‘McIntosh - Papers - Newspaper cutting re Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference (1957)’, NLNZ MS-6759-102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ W. David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth 1965-90* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 20.

vocabulary of continuity was maintaining the impression of Westminster as the mother of parliaments. Decolonisation occurred during what A.F. Madden described as an ‘uncharacteristic mood’; a period when ‘many in Britain seemed to believe the Westminster model might be exported’.²¹ The Empire had been governed in multitudinous ways – from protectorate, to mandate, to self-governing colony – but the preferred model for post-independence governance was more uniform. A parliamentary chamber was built on Westminster lines, complete with mace and despatch boxes. Even though some nations switched to an executive presidency, one-party state or both shortly afterwards, the model bequeathed at independence was nonetheless British. In Madden’s view this appealed both those African leaders who had been ‘conditioned to think British was best and were resentful of being denied it’ and British leaders who ‘thought that to show a brood of Westminsters as the imperial legacy would be a good palliative to the British electorate’.²²

If the erection of little Westminsters made the lowering of the Union Jack in distant lands more benign to the British public, the visits of prime ministers for the Conferences provided periodic reassurance that Britain was still the progenitor of the Commonwealth. Upon arrival for the 1951 Conference, Holland declared: ‘I feel refreshed and invigorated at the very feel of English soil beneath my feet. May God bless our British Commonwealth of Nations’.²³ Such rhapsodising on arrival lingered into the 1960s. At a press Conference at Heathrow in 1962, Diefenbaker declared: ‘To me it is always a glory to visit the capital city of the fatherland of freedom’.²⁴ The corollary of the parental imagery was that it implied that Britain should provide for its progeny without the expectation of a return. The 1948 British Nationality Act granted

²¹ A.F. Madden (ed.), *The End of Empire: Dependencies since 1948* (London, 2000), pp. xxv-xxvi.

²² Madden (ed.), *Dependencies since 1948*, p. xxvi.

²³ ‘Mr Holland’s visit’, *New Zealand News*, 9 January 1951, in ‘Holland clippings Vol 4 28/12/50 – 18/2/52’, NLNZ MSY-1032.

²⁴ Press conference at London airport, 7 September 1962, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - Communique and Press Briefings – 1962’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, R3969-627-7-E.

voting and residency rights in Britain to all Commonwealth countries without seeking similar benefits for Britons living in other Commonwealth countries. One MP justified this by declaring ‘we are the Mother Country of this great Commonwealth and it is quite common for mothers to give to their children benefits which they do not themselves receive’.²⁵ Yet cossetting the Commonwealth by depicting them as offspring was not sustainable. The familial language could easily be inverted to paint Britain as past its prime. During Suez, the Melbourne *Age* described Indian and Pakistani representatives to the UN as exhibiting a ‘sort of angry misery, almost the bitter disappointment of a man who finds his brother a drunkard and a thief’.²⁶ An *Economist* article on the Canadian reaction to Suez likened it to ‘finding a beloved uncle arrested for rape’.²⁷ Such similes highlighted the burdens Britain shouldered by presenting itself as the avuncular host of the Commonwealth family; it had responsibility without command. It was no longer the undisputed head, nor was it just another member. This left British leaders in a quandary when it came to depicting the Commonwealth to the public. Popular ties had been strengthened since the Second World War; hundreds of thousands of Britons had emigrated to the old Commonwealth and parts of Africa. Southern Rhodesia’s European population doubled. Prime Ministers’ Conferences were used by visiting leaders to promote emigration. The *Daily Mirror* dubbed Holland ‘the PM with 33000 jobs’ and accepted his claim that New Zealand had only a dozen unemployed people.²⁸ He even spruiked the vacant position of housekeeper in his own home. The uncritical repetition of such boasts in the British press implicitly reinforced the notion that Commonwealth members served primarily as outlets for British exports, including a surplus of population. The strength of interpersonal ties was such that putting the Commonwealth before Europe seemed self-evident, as seen in Macmillan’s address to the

²⁵ Reiko Karatani, *Defining British Citizenship: Empire, Commonwealth and Modern Britain* (London, 2003), p. 137.

²⁶ *Age* (Melbourne), 7 November 1956, in James Eayrs, *Canada in World Affairs 1955-1957* (Toronto, 1959), p. 188.

²⁷ ‘Shock and distress in Canada’, *Economist*, 10 November 1956, *ibid*.

²⁸ ‘The PM with 33000 jobs’, *Daily Mirror*, 27 January 1951, ‘Holland clippings Vol 4 28/12/50 – 18/2/52’, NLNZ MSY-1032.

nation after the 1957 Conference: 'we have a special relationship to the countries of Europe, which we hope to strengthen and extend. But on one thing we are all agreed – if there should at any time be a conflict between the calls upon us, there is no doubt where we stand: the Commonwealth comes first in our hearts and in our minds'.²⁹

The ritual professions of Commonwealth fealty which accompanied each Conference complicated Macmillan's attempt to extricate Britain from Commonwealth preferences in favour of the EEC. In a televised address at the end of the 1962 Conference, Macmillan still indulged the idea that Britain dictated the shape of the Commonwealth: 'We in Britain have changed the Commonwealth altogether from what it used to be'. He then sought to convince the public to support entry into Europe by attesting it was the only path back to great power status: 'The European Community will become a community of between 220 and 230 million people. Just as strong economically and in every other way as the Soviet Union or the United States. But supposing we are not in it?'.³⁰ In effect, Macmillan had to undo the previous fifteen years of using the Commonwealth to buttress British prestige in favour of claiming Europe would provide a bigger world role. Moreover, he had to convince two different domestic constituencies: the remnant imperial loyalists who took the Commonwealth as meaning the old dominions and a few cash-crop colonies, and the Commonwealth idealists who saw the Commonwealth as a benevolent vehicle for aid and education. Bernard Porter argued that of those whose Commonwealth ties made them reluctant for Britain to join the EEC it was the idealists who were more significant: 'it could have been their commonwealthism, and the multiracial internationalism it was supposed to embody, that made them chary of transferring to what could easily be presented as rich white man's club, rather than a hankering after their

²⁹ 'Britain's policy is to put the Commonwealth first', *Guardian*, 8 July 1957, in 'McIntosh - Papers - Newspaper cutting re Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference (1957)', NLNZ MS-6759-102.

³⁰ 'Television broadcast by Macmillan', 20 September 1962, Papers of Sir John McEwen, NLA MS 4654, box 122.

lost imperial greatness'.³¹ Such 'commonwealthism' had one of its greatest expressions in the Prime Ministers' Conferences. At the early Conferences, publicity was eschewed to discourage the tendency of sections of the press to use them to agitate for greater imperial unity. However, once Asian and African leaders joined the table, publicity was solicited to position the Commonwealth as a rare multiracial, non-militaristic grouping in a Cold War world. Only in the 1960s did discordant voices begin to take hold in the opinion pages, dubbing the Commonwealth a 'gigantic farce'.³² The remainder of this chapter will examine these changes in emphasis, and assess the techniques used to communicate to the public the relevance, or irrelevance, of the Commonwealth.

The last of the Imperial Conferences in 1937 took place over six weeks in the afterglow of George VI's coronation. Other than being the first Conference which Ireland declined to attend, there were few indications that it would be the last in the line. The very fact that George VI was being crowned rather than Edward VIII owed something to close consultation with the dominions, who had firmly opposed Edward marrying Wallis Simpson without renouncing the throne. While the Conference was saddled with an exhaustive agenda extending down to discussions on the New Hebrides and Antarctica, debate over fundamental policies such as appeasement had been vigorous. New Zealand Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage strongly objected to Britain and Canada's enthusiasm for appeasement, asking Eden: 'Is your policy peace at any price; if it is so I cannot accept it'. When Eden replied 'No, not at any price, but peace at almost any price', Savage retorted: 'You can pay too high a price even for peace'.³³ In spite of such free-flowing debate, the Imperial Conferences were invariably recalled after the War as irredeemably stolid and bureaucratic. Writing in 1948, H.V. Hodson declared that the Imperial Conference had been 'quietly smothered in its bed after World War II – put down like

³¹ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004), p. 300.

³² Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 172.

³³ Carl Berendsen, *Mr Ambassador: Memoirs of Sir Carl Berendsen* (Wellington, 2009), pp. 128-29.

an old dog which had become feeble and smelly, and which must not now be mentioned before the children, let they embarrass by asking what became of him'.³⁴ Hodson's vivid language made a salient point: it was never adequately explained to the public why the Imperial Conferences were abandoned. A name change was required with the advent of the Asian members, but this did not necessitate dispensing with formal subcommittees and binding resolutions. Attlee condemned the Imperial Conferences on the grounds they were 'very formal with many speeches', telling reporters before the 1948 Prime Ministers' Conference that he recalled participating in the 1930 Imperial Conference as a junior minister, where 'the whole thing went off into formal committees'.³⁵ He did concede, however, that 'many matters were discussed and decisions come to'.³⁶ Similarly in 1948, Mackenzie King reminded the press that 'the meeting in London is not, as some have assumed, in the nature of an Imperial Conference, at which several ministers and their advisers will be present and where a decision upon policy will be made'.³⁷ The public could be forgiven for thinking that the Imperial Conferences had been ended to avoid making decisions, and to some extent they were right.

As the first chapter observed, a key reason why the 1944 Conference was styled as a Prime Ministers' Conference rather than an Imperial Conference was to avoid fuelling calls for an Imperial War Cabinet. This gave Churchill a freer hand in the conduct of the war and assuaged Mackenzie King's fear of binding collective decisions. The determination to avoid the atmosphere of an Imperial Conference extended to a disdain for publicity. The 1944 administrative arrangements file envisaged that the Conference would occur almost in secret: 'no objection is seen to the press reporting that meetings are being held, but they are being asked to avoid specifying the place where the meetings are being held. To avoid possible

³⁴ H.V. Hodson, *Twentieth Century Empire* (London, 1948), p. 131.

³⁵ Note of Prime Minister's meeting with Commonwealth correspondents', 8 October 1948, in 'British Commonwealth prime ministers' conference 1948, proposals for', LAC RG 25 Vol 3558 1075-40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Times*, 26 August 1948, in J.D.B. Miller, *Britain and the Old Dominions* (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 154-5.

embarrassment, the press is also being discouraged from publishing anything in the shape of a precise list of those present at any meeting'.³⁸ This approach clashed with the plans of the Canadian Wartime Information Board, which planned to send a dozen journalists to London to report on the Conference and present it to the Canadian public as a vital stage in determining the shape of the post-war global order. The Dominions Office sought to dissuade the Canadians, warning that 'it might lead to US journalists following suit and would certainly tend to arouse expectations of sensational developments which we are at pains to avoid.'³⁹ British officials were justified in fearing that the press would sensationalise the Conference, although deterring dominion journalists may have had the unintended consequence that an even greater proportion of coverage was filtered through the editorial lines of the British press. Grant Dexter of the *Winnipeg Free Press* complained that 'the Beaverbrook *Express* and the Harmsworth *Daily Mail* grossly misrepresented the proceedings of the conference in an attempt to make their readers believe that a centralisation policy was being approved'.⁴⁰ In particular, much ink was spilled over the Australian proposal for an 'Empire Secretariat'. Curtin gave a press conference at which he stated 'If I cannot have four brethren I will have three brethren, and three are better than none'.⁴¹ This seemed to connote that the Secretariat would be going ahead regardless of Mackenzie King's almost inevitable disapproval; the *Montreal Gazette* led with 'Curtin for Empire council even if Canada stays out; split on foreign affairs'.⁴² The *Economist* also quoted Curtin's remark and suggested that Canada could join later, noting that John Bracken, leader of Canada's Progressive Conservatives was in favour.⁴³ Curtin's plans came to nothing, but their ventilation in the press was nonetheless noted by British officials. The 1946 administrative arrangements files recorded that 'In preliminary discussions at the Dominions Office it was decided that it

³⁸ 'Note about press arrangements', TNA CAB 21/851.

³⁹ Dominions Office to Canadian High Commission, London, 13 April 1944, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Grant Dexter, *The Commonwealth Conference* (Winnipeg, 1944), p. 15.

⁴¹ Wrong to Norman Robertson, 5 May 1944, 'King 1944: Massey-McLean', LAC MG26-J1, volume 366, microfilm reel C-7053.

⁴² *Montreal Gazette*, *ibid.*

⁴³ *Economist*, 13 May 1944, in C.S.A. Ritchie to Mackenzie King, *ibid.*

was not desirable to foster publicity (in contrast with the line taken at the meeting of 1944)'.⁴⁴ Given that journalists had been actively discouraged from travelling to cover the 1944 Conference, it is difficult to conceive what further steps could be taken to avoid fostering publicity.

1946 was thus set up to be the most low-profile of all the Conferences. As the prime ministers were never assembled together at any one time, there was not even an opportunity for a collective photograph in the Downing Street garden. There was, however, a need to give the newspapers some material, if only to avoid the speculative headlines of 1944. The 1946 administrative arrangement file noted 'if the press were given no official news garbled accounts of the proceedings would be published'. Therefore a nightly briefing was given on a non-attributable basis and a special press conference held a week before the Conference opened, to give 'an explanation of the way in which the meeting differed from an imperial conference'.⁴⁵ Yet this concerted attempt to filter news through the Dominions Office and the Cabinet Office had a flaw. The six-week Conference was held while parliament was in session. The opposition had ample opportunity to question the progress of the Conference. When Attlee told the Commons that the dominion prime ministers all agreed with his approach to renegotiation of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, Eden injected: 'I am not sure whether I heard the Right Hon gentlemen aright. I asked whether the timing, method and wording were agreed with the dominions'. Churchill followed up by asking: 'Is it the fact they were consulted before the decision was taken, or was the decision taken and they were just told of the decision?'. Attlee responded 'of course they were consulted before the decision', opening himself to criticism that he had given the dominions a veto over an area of British policy.⁴⁶ He was also interrogated two

⁴⁴ 'Notes on administrative arrangements', TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Fourteenth meeting, appendix I, 'Extract from House of Commons Official Report for Monday 6th May, 1946', TNA CAB 133/86.

days later at the Conference, when Smuts opined that ‘he did not think right that United Kingdom ministers should be pressed to state in the House of Commons the views expressed by dominion governments in such consultation as this’. He pointed out that ‘They had no means of joining in the debates themselves and anything said in the House of Commons might place them in an uncomfortable position in their own countries’.⁴⁷ Attlee undertook to make a correction in the Commons that evening, in which he clarified: ‘I said that the dominions had ‘agreed’ to our method of approach to the revision of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. I think the word agreed may have given a wrong impression, there was full information and discussion. The dominion ministers were not called upon to express agreement in a matter which was one of United Kingdom responsibility, but they realised that the line of approach has to be decided by the United Kingdom’. Somewhat ironically, he used the word agreement again in his conclusion: ‘This statement, I may add, is made after consultation with the dominion ministers now in London and had their full agreement’.⁴⁸ It was unsurprising that after the incident, Conferences were timed to avoid parliamentary sessions. Other than two days of cross-over at the end of the 1949 Conference, Conferences during parliamentary sittings were avoided until 1955.

The other threat to the secrecy of the Conferences was also parliamentary; specifically, the reports prime ministers gave to their parliaments upon their return. In 1946 Chifley’s statement to the Australian House of Representatives was extremely candid. He told the House that the Conference had considered a ‘proposal prepared by the United Kingdom that each member of the British Commonwealth should accept responsibility for the development and defence of their own areas and the strategic zone around it’. Chifley disclosed specific recommendations such as the decentralisation of shipbuilding and aircraft construction, and the restructuring of

⁴⁷ Fourteenth meeting, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fourteenth meeting, appendix II, ‘Egypt: Statement by Mr Attlee in House of Commons on 8th May, 1946’, *ibid.*

dominion service training establishments ‘on such a basis that they could expand quickly and easily to receive and train United Kingdom manpower in the event of war’.⁴⁹ British officials were dismayed that the proposal of the Chiefs of Staff was referred to in the public domain, especially as it lacked the backing of British ministers. The administrative arrangements file recorded that Chifley’s report ‘contained a certain amount of confidential material which had not been previously published, including reference to the content of secret papers’.⁵⁰ A similar incident occurred a decade later in New Zealand, when Holland told parliament that he had committed at the 1956 Conference to sending a division to Malaya within ninety days of any major hostility. McIntosh wrote how ‘to the amazement of us all, [Holland] practically reiterated over the air what he has said in the private meetings’, referring to the fact that parliament was broadcast live on radio. McIntosh took swift action ‘persuading the press to suppress this information ... and Hansard was also censored’. Nevertheless, ‘an indignant telegram from London’ arrived the next day, asking ‘what in fact the P.M. had said and why on earth we had not prevented his making such an embarrassing reference to the increase on forces in Malaya’.⁵¹ This prompted a rare show of New Zealand defiance, with McIntosh recording that Holland had retorted that ‘he was Prime Minister, and no one was going to tell him what he should or should not report to Parliament; it would be the day when he had to consult a black man before his own people, and so on. He read me a draft message he wanted to send to Eden demanding an apology’.⁵² The antipodean incidents demonstrate the close scrutiny Britain applied to references to the Conferences in Commonwealth parliaments.

Accusatory telegrams from London may appear incompatible with Commonwealth equality but Britain had reason to monitor parliamentary statements. Just as Commonwealth countries

⁴⁹ ‘Chifley report to Parliament’, 19 June 1946, TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁵⁰ ‘Notes on administrative arrangements’, TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁵¹ McIntosh to Shanahan, 22 August 1956, in McGibbon (ed.), *Unofficial Channels*, p. 204.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

resented their opinions being cited in Westminster debates, prime ministerial statements were the definitive public record of each leader's view of the Conference, but Britain had no right of reply even though it was sometimes subject to criticism. For instance, Eric Williams' 1965 report to the Trinidad and Tobago House of Representatives condemned the residual imperialistic outlook of British 'politicians and publicists' on the topics of Vietnam and Rhodesia: 'The conference's deliberations on these issues were kicked about ... for all the world as if it were a conference of the ruling party of Britain on the eve of a general election ... these and similar matters were treated as if the United Kingdom had some proprietary right over the Commonwealth and as if Commonwealth prime ministers convene only to ratify or endorse British proposals'. Conference organisers came in for direct censure, with Williams declaring 'This mental attitude was reflected in the conference room itself. If the United Kingdom did not wish to include the burning issue of migration on the agenda, then migration was not included'.⁵³ Conversely, parliamentary statements could be used to ward off internal criticism. Nehru invoked the spirit of Gandhi to commend Commonwealth membership to the Constituent Assembly in 1949. He stated that 'goodwill is always precious from any quarter. Therefore, I had a feeling when I was considering the matter in London and later that I had done something that would in a small measure, perhaps, have met with the approval of Gandhiji'.⁵⁴ Malan also invoked goodwill to defend his decision to accept India's continued membership in 1949. He told the House of Assembly in Cape Town that if the Commonwealth lost the 'goodwill' of India, the anti-communist West would have lost its 'foothold' in Asia. He argued that the decision to accept India as a republic was preferable to the treaty relationship that Smuts had previously advocated: 'I personally came to the conclusion that it would be wrong and dangerous, particularly for South Africa, to think for a moment of accepting ... that

⁵³ 'Report by the Prime Minister on the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference', July 23 1965, EWMC MS 747.

⁵⁴ Nehru in Indian Constituent Assembly, 16 May 1949, in Hugh Tinker, *Separate and Unequal - India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth 1920-1950* (London, 1976), 389.

India would be associated with the Commonwealth on a treaty basis ... as soon as any country enters the Commonwealth on a treaty basis she is in a position where she is able to impose conditions'.⁵⁵ It was significant that Malan's statement was reissued as a pamphlet by the public relations department of South Africa House in London; it indicated how nations sought to publicise their stance in the de facto Commonwealth capital. Parliamentary statements were useful for setting the record straight in their home countries, but it was in London that news was disseminated across the Commonwealth.

Despite the attempts in 1944 and 1946 to impose secrecy upon the contents of the Conference, there was no golden era where leaders conferred without consideration of publicity. As early as 1948, Peter Fraser used public opinion to justify erecting a Commonwealth standing committee. The actual structure of the committee seemed less important than being seen to take 'some definite step': 'He thought that the peoples of the Commonwealth countries would expect something positive to emerge from the present conferences'.⁵⁶ It is worth speculating whether holding the meetings in No. 10, rather than a retreat-style venue such as suggested by Mackenzie King in 1944, heightened the sense of needing to respond to popular expectations. King certainly objected to the fact that his invitation to the 1948 Conference emphasised the positive impact his appearance would have on the British public: 'I felt quite annoyed when I read in it reference to public opinion in Britain being disappointed if I were not present. The public opinion I have to consider is that of Canada. It annoys me beyond words ... to have pressure put on from a government in Britain as though our government were in some way subordinate to it'.⁵⁷ In spite of Mackenzie King's complaints, Britain nonetheless retained responsibility for public relations. As late as 1964, it was assumed that a British official could fulfil a dual role as

⁵⁵ South Africa House, *Dr Malan Defines South Africa's Position in the Commonwealth - The New Formula* (London, 1949).

⁵⁶ Eighth meeting, 18 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

⁵⁷ J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster (eds.), *The Mackenzie King Record: Volume 3, 1945-1946* (Toronto, 1970), p. 202, in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 220-1.

a mouthpiece for both British and Commonwealth interests. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee may have phrased it as a suggestion, but the presumption was that precedent would rule the day: ‘prime ministers might be invited to agree that the public relations adviser to the United Kingdom Prime Minister should in effect be the public relations officer of the meeting’. Similarly, a belief persisted that British mastheads should moderate their tone in order to support British interests: ‘The Commonwealth Secretary said that he had arranged to see representatives of the United Kingdom press ... and that he would emphasise to them the importance of retaining a responsible attitude throughout and avoiding the search for sensational items of news’.⁵⁸

Britain had the advantage that many Commonwealth newspapers had Fleet Street proprietors. For instance, Accra’s most popular newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, was owned by London’s *Daily Mirror*.⁵⁹ The *Trinidad Mirror* was owned by Thomson Newspapers; when they proposed to shut down the title in 1966, Eric Williams sent his Attorney-General to London to appeal unsuccessfully for a halt to the sale of assets.⁶⁰ The British government also had significant influence over how news was disseminated internationally through its long-standing involvement with Reuters. A subsidised ‘inter-empire’ service had operated since the First World War.⁶¹ Once imperial rule was relinquished, the ‘soft power’ of media management became even more important. The Australian Associated Presses and New Zealand Press Association became part-owners of Reuters in 1947 and a similar deal was struck with the Press Trust of India from 1947 to 1953.⁶² Reuters was not just a bulwark against American dominance of English-language news sources; it actively assisted the British government and received

⁵⁸ Twenty-ninth Meeting, 1 July 1964, TNA CAB 148/1.

⁵⁹ B.M. Williams, Canadian High Commission, Ghana to Department of External Affairs, 25 April, 1960, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1960’, LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, part 3, 50085-H-40.

⁶⁰ Office of the Prime Minister, ‘Press Release #301’, 9 September 1966, in National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago (NATT).

⁶¹ Simon James Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876-1922* (Oxford, 2003), p. 195.

⁶² Donald Read, *The Power of News: The History of Reuters* (Oxford, 1999), p. 313; *ibid.*, p. 318.

subsidies until 1980.⁶³ This cosy relationship aroused suspicions in some capitals; in 1956 Nehru's cabinet decreed that all stories in Indian newspapers had to be distributed by an Indian-owned news agency.⁶⁴ In the lead up to the first post-Suez Conference in 1957, the CRO was acutely conscious of Britain's fragile international reputation. Seeking a swifter source of feedback regarding coverage of the Conference in overseas papers than the usual reports from embassies and high commissions, it was suggested that Reuters report misleading or negative coverage directly to it. A.H. Joyce proposed writing to Reuters' chief political correspondent, Fraser Wighton, observing that 'we have worked together for years on such occasions as the Prime Ministers' Meeting and I am pretty confident that the reply will be that Reuters will help us in any way they can; and of course, we shall have to help them unofficially in return'.⁶⁵ In his letter to Wighton, Joyce declared: 'I am most anxious to make my own contribution in stimulating the Commonwealth Relations Office to support the Reuters service to countries of the Commonwealth in any way which will avoid, as we all wish to, any semblance of the word subsidy'.⁶⁶

The proposal to use Reuters as a monitoring service indicated the great emphasis placed upon using the Conferences to showcase the Commonwealth to a foreign audience. The attempts to shun publicity for the Conferences were abandoned once Asian prime ministers took their place at the table and the Commonwealth could be presented as multiracial body. The decision to accommodate India as a republic aroused worldwide interest, and raised the prospect that the Commonwealth would remain as large as the Empire which preceded it, at least geographically. Indeed, the end of monarchical unity opened the possibility of the Commonwealth incorporating foreign states, especially in the post-War fervour for building new international

⁶³ K. M. Shrivastava, *News Agencies from Pigeon to Internet* (New Delhi, 2007), p. 153.

⁶⁴ Read, *The Power of News*, p. 326.

⁶⁵ Joyce to Cockram, 23 May 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁶⁶ Joyce to Wighton, 17 June 1957, *ibid.*

institutions. Before the 1948 Conference, Dutch newspaper *De Volkekreat* opined that ‘if it is true that the Commonwealth organisation is to open its doors to all countries without attaching the condition that new entrants are to subject themselves to the British crown, an opportunity will have been created for western Europe and the Commonwealth which will have unparalleled possibilities’.⁶⁷ Another Dutch masthead, *Da Maasbode* editorialised at the end of the 1948 Conference that ‘the foundations have been laid in London for a defence organisation all over the world ... now that Britain has given up the ‘British’ Commonwealth it has become a new centre, of Commonwealth, West Union and Atlantic Union together’.⁶⁸ Dutch enthusiasm was such that British Ambassador to The Hague was instructed to make it clear that ‘The question of including within the Commonwealth independent nations previously outside it was not considered at the meeting, and there is no intention of considering it in any foreseeable future’.⁶⁹ For missions in smaller countries, the emphasis may have been on clearing up misunderstandings, but in larger posts the major concern was whether the Conferences were gaining traction in the press at all. The British Embassy in Peking reported anxiously in 1956 that the Conference ‘was covered quite widely by the *People’s Daily*, but not given great prominence’.⁷⁰ Conversely, the Embassy was not unduly concerned after the 1957 Conference when ‘The press made great play with the imperialist nature of Commonwealth Defence plans’ – it was better for the Commonwealth to be condemned than ignored.⁷¹ Likewise, the level of coverage in the American press was closely watched. American coverage was comprehensive, even if reporters had to resort to unusual metaphors to sustain the interest of readers. In 1951 the *New York Times* wrote that the Conference ‘may well affect world developments. Mao Tse-Tung will play the role of Banquo’s ghost at the conference table. To Prime Minister Nehru he

⁶⁷ *De Volkekreat*, 1 October 1948, in Phillip Nichols to Bevin, 28 October 1948, TNA DO 35/2255.

⁶⁸ Canadian Embassy, The Hague to Department of External Affairs, 26 October 1948, in ‘British Commonwealth prime ministers’ conference 1948, proposals for’, LAC RG 25 Vol 3558 1075-40.

⁶⁹ November 1948 dispatch to The Hague, TNA DO 35/2255.

⁷⁰ British Embassy, Peking to Foreign Office, 20 July 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

⁷¹ British Embassy, Peking to Foreign Office, 19 July 1956, *ibid.*

will doubtless be as harmless as Harvey's invisible rabbit, but to the others he will be shaking "his gory locks".⁷² A similar analogy was used by an Indian newspaper to describe the unspoken American influence over the Conferences. In 1957 the British High Commission in New Delhi forwarded an excerpt from the *Hindustan Standard*, which read:

The prime minister of the United Kingdom takes the chair but behind him and many of his conferences the shadow of Mr. Dulles inevitably moves unseen but palpably felt so that it is no wonder that when the question of the admission of China to the UN was being discussed at the London conference at least some of the members present looked for where Mr. Dulles should have been.⁷³

The vivid picture painted by the Indian journalist pointed to an important question – to what extent did the 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States entitle America to privileged access to the Conferences? In 1946 the American Embassy requested a 'daily talk' during the Conference including details on the substance of discussions. British officials demurred, but did agree to a 'talk every few days', at which the Embassy would be informed of the agenda, but not the substance unless 'the State Department were said to have made special enquiry'. In addition, the Embassy was informed whenever 'the press had given an incorrect account of the proceedings or placed a wrong emphasis'.⁷⁴ Before the 1955 Conference the organising committee led by Norman Brook decided that giving the American Embassy a 'general account' at the conclusion of the Conference was preferable to providing a daily account; the implication being that the Embassy had received them during earlier Conferences.⁷⁵ Thus, while America never sought to have a 'shadow of Mr Dulles' in the form of an observer in the Cabinet Room, the frequency of briefings they received was doubtlessly higher than some other members of the Commonwealth would have wished. In 1956 CRO officials stressed that 'the account to be given to the Americans would be the private concern of the United

⁷² *New York Times*, 4 January 1951, 'External Affairs: Commonwealth Conferences: Correspondence and Memoranda 1948-49', LAC MG26-L, volume 233.

⁷³ *Hindustan Standard*, 30 June 1957, in British High Commission, New Delhi to CRO, 2 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁷⁴ 'Notes on administrative arrangements', TNA CAB 21/1798.

⁷⁵ A.J. Brown to Snelling, 20 June 1956, TNA DO 35/5169.

Kingdom'.⁷⁶ While no other foreign country received the same level of briefings, all British diplomats were encouraged to promote the Conferences. Before the 1960 Conference the Foreign Office issued a memorandum to 'Her Majesty's Representatives', anticipating sources of foreign confusion such as the participation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Posts were urged 'draw on this material to obtain favourable publicity for this meeting and for the Commonwealth concept as a whole'; exemplifying how Britain seemed to retain primary responsibility for promoting the Conferences even though they were ostensibly multilateral.⁷⁷ The problem was that the Conferences generated little in the way of saleable material for a foreign audience. When CRO branches were asked to provide examples of Commonwealth co-operation for publicity purposes before the 1957 Conference, D.J.C. Crawley wrote: 'In the files of the economic policy department there are no particular examples of effective co-operation between Commonwealth countries since the last meeting'.⁷⁸ Securing positive coverage in foreign capitals was difficult when even CRO officials could not identify the benefits of the Conferences. In spite of this, the Conferences did receive comprehensive and at times effusive coverage in foreign newspapers, much of which centred on the achievement of forming a voluntary organisation out of imperialist origins. Spanish title *El Mundo* proclaimed in 1956 that 'these silk ribbons ... are more durable than iron links, and the Commonwealth is indestructible'.⁷⁹ British officials in the Netherlands identified amongst the Dutch press a 'touch of envy and bewilderment that, in contrast to their own sad experiences in Indonesia, the Asian members of the Commonwealth should remain and thrive within the same fold'.⁸⁰ The outsider's perspective of foreign editorialists could produce perceptive analysis. In 1956 one Dutch masthead argued 'that the only real link between the members of the Commonwealth ... is the "intellectual stamp of the British"'. The reason for the regular meetings ... is the

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Foreign Office memorandum, 16 December 1959, TNA FCO 0141/18016.

⁷⁸ D.J.C. Crawley to Colonel Edwards, 6 June 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁷⁹ British Embassy, Madrid to Foreign Office, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ British Embassy, The Hague to Foreign Office, 11 July 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

“prosaic need to have a periodical exchange of thought with people whose opinion is valued and whose motives are not suspect”. Therefore the editorial presciently asserted that the greatest threat to the Commonwealth was South Africa, because ‘South Africans of non-British decent have been less influenced by the British cultural tradition than almost all other races of non-British decent within the Commonwealth’.⁸¹

This same British cultural tradition made the task of publicising the Conferences in Commonwealth countries markedly easier. Whereas foreign newspapers sought unusual metaphors to make the Conferences comprehensible, Commonwealth mastheads could report on the proceedings in the familiar style of parliamentary reporting. For instance, in 1957 the *Ceylon Observer* led its coverage by declaring: ‘Asian opinion prevailed at today’s session of the Commonwealth Conference, and Indian and Ceylonese representatives had the house with them after the lively discussion on the United Nations’.⁸² Indeed, an occasional complaint was that the Conferences were too familiar; that shared cultural traditions made the Conferences appear more humble than they actually were. In 1957, the *London News Chronicle* argued that the Conferences needed ‘more warmth and display. Studied informality and the country house atmosphere can be overdone. A little more show, the courtesy of a parade or two, could influence millions of minds still unmoved by what Commonwealth means’.⁸³ The *Melbourne Age* echoed the sentiment, arguing that ‘the country house party theme’ disguised the international significance of the gatherings: ‘we have a fabulous phenomena, the premiers of some 400 million people embracing a common theme, debating subjects of immense importance on lines we know to be broadly just and we claim to be bored’.⁸⁴ However, as the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² ‘Ceylon delegate calls for a stronger UN: only true safeguard that smaller nations have’, *Ceylon Observer*, 3 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁸³ ‘The family grows up’, *News Chronicle* (London), in ‘McIntosh - Papers - Newspaper cutting re Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference (1957)’, NLNZ MS-6759-102.

⁸⁴ James Cameron, *Age* (Melbourne), in British High Commission Canberra to CRO, 2 July 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

News Chronicle article alluded to, the ‘country house theme’ of the Conferences was deliberately cultivated; ‘studied informality’ was mutually agreeable to both host and visitor. As the first chapter of the thesis contended, Britain already flattered its visitors with pomp and ceremony, but in a manner which served to domesticate prime ministers rather than treat them as foreign statesmen. Even royal hospitality was of a more informal character than that of a state visit. For instance, in 1959 Nkrumah was given the special favour of being the first prime minister to be invited to Balmoral, the Queen’s private summer residence. Such courtesies were repaid with expressions of familial enthusiasm for the royals. When it was announced in August 1959 that the Queen was expecting her third child, Ghanaian minister Kofi Baako told the press that the government was ‘happy that they are going to have another Ghanaian’. The British High Commission in Accra wryly noted ‘This raises an interesting point of nationality’.⁸⁵ The positing of Prince Andrew as a baby Ghanaian exemplified the familial feel of the Commonwealth even on the cusp of the 1960s. Conversely, the ‘studied informality’ of confidential meetings and Chequers weekends made it easy for leaders to disown the Commonwealth when it suited them – there were no ballots to bind them nor verbatim transcripts to prove what was said.

In addition to the lack of verifiable votes or minutes, the media environment left enormous latitude for ‘spin’ and for filling columns and airwaves with soft news items. A fine example was a BBC Home Service bulletin during the 1961 Conference on Verwoerd presenting the London Zoo with a pair of springboks. The gift was reported as marking the ‘last occasion of South Africa’s attendance as the Union of South Africa’, with Verwoerd declaring ‘I hope they will grow as successfully as our new republic’.⁸⁶ There was no intimation of any dissent to South Africa’s continued membership, let alone the prospect that Verwoerd would withdraw in three days’ time. The only item in the bulletin on the content of the Conference was an improbable

⁸⁵ British High Commission, Ghana, to CRO, 8 August 1959, TNA DO 35/8112.

⁸⁶ Telex report 11-12 March 1961, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/128, LONB 53/15/4F.

plan from Holyoake for a Commonwealth space programme dubbed ‘space for peace’, utilising Blue Streak and the Woomera rocket range. A space programme using Blue Streak was eventually attempted – but as a European rather than a Commonwealth effort.⁸⁷ Content from the BBC had a disproportionate influence because its output was widely diffused across the Commonwealth. During his first Conference in 1957, Nkrumah was invited to give no less than eight BBC broadcasts – more than any other leader. Interestingly, he declined invitations to three programmes for the British domestic audience, and of the five offers he did accept, four had an international focus: *London Calling Asia*, *Calling Ghana*, *Commonwealth Club* and *At Home and Abroad*.⁸⁸ This was logical: as the BBC ran a dedicated West African Service, Nkrumah almost had to treat it as a domestic Ghanaian broadcaster. Equally however, broadcasting was used to impress upon the British domestic audience the importance of the Commonwealth. From lectures by Ivor Jennings and Nicholas Mansergh on the Third Programme, to *Commonwealth Jazz Club* on BBC Two, the Commonwealth featured heavily on the airwaves whilst the Conference was in session.⁸⁹ Some broadcasts were quite innovative. For instance, the 1951 Conference was the first time a television crew had ever been admitted inside No. 10. Richard Dimbleby presented a special programme in which he circulated around the drawing room interviewing Commonwealth leaders; only Menzies refused, remarking that ‘he understood that it was a silent television programme’.⁹⁰ Menzies’ reluctance aside, the programme illustrated the unique informality of the Conferences; it was difficult to envisage another international gathering where a journalist could mingle with the leaders at the opening session, with the commonality of English making each utterance accessible to the viewer at home. Similarly, prime ministers were prepared to submit themselves to interrogation from the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ ‘List of the principal sound and television broadcasts June/July’, TNA DO 35/6225.

⁸⁹ ‘Approach to self-government in the Commonwealth’, *Radio Times*, 1 July 1955, issue 1651, p. 13; ‘Nationalism and the British Commonwealth’, *Radio Times*, 3 December 1954, issue 1621, p. 13; *Commonwealth Jazz Club*, *Radio Times*, 26 August 1965, issue 2181, p. 43.

⁹⁰ ‘Empire premiers at vital peace talks’, *Weekly Overseas Mail*, 13 January 1951, in ‘Holland clippings Vol 4 28/12/50 – 18/2/52’, NLNZ MSY-1032.

likes of Robin Day, who hosted a special episode of *Panorama* before the 1964 and 1965 Conferences. The 1964 edition included Douglas-Home, Ayub Khan, Eric Williams and Ugandan Prime Minister Milton Obote. Appearing as equals before the camera forced the prime ministers to present a united front. The *Observer* opined that ‘When it was all over and they had failed to make any noticeable breach in their statesmanlike front, Sir Alec looked as if he would have liked to have kissed them all, even Dr Williams, for being so gentlemanly and responsible’.⁹¹

On the whole, however, broadcasting during the Conferences was deferential or banal. Some programmes such as *Commonwealth Magazine* were made with the direct cooperation of Commonwealth governments and served as advertisements for emigration.⁹² Only in the 1960s did programmes with more challenging titles emerge, such as *Commonwealth Crisis*.⁹³ Additionally, listings from the *Radio Times* indicate that a large proportion of Commonwealth related programming was light entertainment where the term was used as a synonym for Empire. For instance a 1955 programme, *Commonwealth of Song*, has the description: ‘Artists from the Commonwealth of Nations gather in London to send greetings in song to their folks at home and to listeners in the Motherland’.⁹⁴ In the mid-1960s, attempts were made to use showbiz to disguise the lack of political consensus. The first Commonwealth Arts Festival was held in London in 1965. A ‘Great Dance Gala’ was simulcast on BBC One and the Home Service featuring over 250 performers from Tanzanian stilt dancers to Morris men. The *Spectator* dubbed it a ‘demonic mingling of irreconcilables’.⁹⁵ It is tempting to mock such clumsy attempts at multiculturalism, but it should be recognised that all such enterprises, however unconvincing, kept the Commonwealth in the public consciousness. In addition to broadcasting, vast amounts

⁹¹ *Observer*, 12 July 1964, Marshall Papers, NLNZ MS-1403-155/3.

⁹² *Radio Times*, 29 April 1955, issue 1642, p. 26.

⁹³ *Radio Times*, 30 August 1962, issue 2025, p. 27.

⁹⁴ *Radio Times*, 21 October 1955, issue 1667, p. 23.

⁹⁵ Hilary Spurling, ‘Nelson Amazed’, *Spectator*, 24 September 1965, p. 9.

of newsprint were dedicated to covering the Conferences. New Zealand press officer Trevor Campbell reported with pride that 570 column inches were dedicated to Holyoake in British newspapers during the 1961 Conference, not including references in general articles on the Conference.⁹⁶ In addition, the wives of visiting leaders were fodder for the women's pages. This may have raised the profile of Commonwealth visitors but did little to challenge prevailing gender or national stereotypes. Florence Holland of New Zealand wished to slavishly follow British fashions: 'I want a coat like Lady Eden wore at Chequers this week-end'. Susanna Strijdom of South Africa was dubbed 'the silent one' by one journalist after declaring 'a menu is too intimate to discuss'. The same 1956 article dubbed Ceylon's Sirimavo Bandaranaike 'the laughing one', who had an unusual plan to spend an evening at the greyhounds during the Conference.⁹⁷ There was no indication that she had any political interests, yet four years later she was Prime Minister. Remarkably, the *Daily Telegraph* still profiled her in 1961 as if she were an appendage to her late husband: 'she is still a housewife at heart and infinitely prefers the quietude of family life to the turmoil of politics'. It rendered her as preoccupied with buying warm clothes for her 12-year-old son and taking him to Hamley's toyshop. The article suggested that her hope for the Conference was not a policy breakthrough, but rather 'to find time to see "King Kong", the African musical'.⁹⁸ By contrast, the article gave voice to Betsie Verwoerd's policy on family life; namely that girls should 'devote their knowledge and intelligence to staying at home and caring for their family'.⁹⁹

Such features in the women's pages may appear outdated to modern readers, but they nonetheless demonstrated how the Conferences permeated every part of the newspaper. The

⁹⁶ A.T. Campbell to Department of External Affairs, 6 April 1961, in 'Commonwealth conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference - London 1961 Publicity', ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/128, LONB 53/15/4F.

⁹⁷ Joy Matthews, 'how much can you tell about a big man by talking to the big man's wife?', Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, box 565, folder 81.

⁹⁸ Paula Davies, 'Four women of the Commonwealth shopping for their grandchildren', *Daily Telegraph* (London), 9 March 1961, p. 13, *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

familial feel of the Conferences was not purely rhetorical when wives and children were in attendance. While much of the coverage was patronising, such as the declaration that Robert Menzies' daughter Heather would be 'welcome at any British fireside', because she was 'light brown haired, slim [and] fond of games', profile pieces did at least occasionally inform a British audience of different cultures.¹⁰⁰ Chaudhri Mohammed Ali's wife made it clear that her role was not purely ceremonial. She explained that 'I am only interested in social welfare' and that entertaining took her away from her work. She also explicated her religious motivations, stating 'I have divided my day into three. Eight hours for myself. Eight hours for my family ... and eight hours for my God'.¹⁰¹ On occasion, prime ministerial wives could themselves create headlines. Just before the 1969 Conference, Dame Zara Holt, wife of the late Australian Prime Minister Harold, released an autobiography which claimed that at the September 1966 Conference one of the African leaders got 'very excited because Britain would not send an army to attack Rhodesia'. She wrote that during one plenary session 'he stood up and just shouted: "kill, kill, kill"'. This cry was taken up by practically every African prime minister from then on'.¹⁰² Dame Zara's account was clearly unreliable – she also claimed that Wilson made Holt chair of one of the sessions, even though he was one of the most junior leaders – but it was impossible to disprove, given that Holt had died and the minutes were secret. African leaders sought an official denial from the Commonwealth Secretary-General but as Melbourne's *Sunday Observer* noted, 'since all Prime Ministers' Conferences are confidential he has no authority to put the record straight'.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ 'Heather from Australia', *Weekly News* (Dundee), 20 January 1951, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, box 565, folder 77.

¹⁰¹ Joy Matthews, 'how much can you tell about a big man by talking to the big man's wife?', Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, box 565, folder 81.

¹⁰² Zara Holt, *My Life and Harry: An Autobiography* (Melbourne, 1968), p. 157.

¹⁰³ *Sunday Observer* (Melbourne), 8 December 1968, NAA A1838 899/6/14, part 3.

The episode highlighted the difficulties of public relations at the Conferences. The Commonwealth Secretariat was established in 1965, but it was not initially given overall responsibility for publicity. As host, Britain disseminated material on the Conferences abroad via British Information Services, but as the *Economist* noted after the 1966 Conference, the content was staid and unresponsive: ‘Britain, alone of its members, puts out propaganda on behalf of the Commonwealth, and their propaganda is highly, indeed, self-defeatingly, Anglocentric’.¹⁰⁴ Material from British Information Services offered little evidence for their claims. For instance, a 1955 press release stated: ‘the student of world affairs would go badly astray if he ... assumed that the Prime Ministers’ Conference was not a factor of prime significance at the present juncture’. As proof, the press release pointed to the 1951 communiqué which had ‘specified “certain courses which must be pursued if real peace is to come”’. Yet the press release did not list what those courses were.¹⁰⁵ The fundamental problem was that no single country could provide the differentiated material required by the multitude of media organisations. By 1965 over 600 press passes were issued during the Conference.¹⁰⁶ The press of different countries had wildly different priorities – for instance in 1951 the *New Zealand Herald* called the proposal for a plebiscite in Kashmir a ‘minor’ matter and concentrated on giving Holland credit for offering troops to maintain order during any plebiscite.¹⁰⁷ It is hard to imagine the issue was considered minor in the subcontinent. To address such differences, unofficial press briefings were held by individual delegations on national lines. These were intimate affairs; Diefenbaker described the ground rules thusly: ‘when we conclude I’ll tell you in general what is and what is not on the record. If I tell you it’s off the record then you will leave it off at the end’.¹⁰⁸ Through this informal arrangement the particulars of discussions could

¹⁰⁴ ‘Looser yet and looser’, *Economist*, 3 September 1966, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-159.

¹⁰⁵ Vincent Harlow, ‘when the Commonwealth prime ministers meet in London’, British Information Services New Delhi, 27 January 1955, NAI 58-R&I/1955.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Notes on press arrangements made for the Commonwealth prime ministers’ meeting June 1965’, ‘Prime Ministers’ Conference June 1965 - Press Conferences’, LAC MG31-E47, volume 6, file 4, R5276-62-X-E.

¹⁰⁷ Editorial, *New Zealand Herald*, 17 December 1951, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-087.

¹⁰⁸ Diefenbaker press conference, 19 September 1962, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - Communique and Press Briefings – 1962’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, R3969-627-7-E.

be safely disclosed down to the finest detail; during the 1961 Conference, Canadian correspondents even wanted to know where Verwoerd had been sitting in the Conference room in case it had affected the tone of debate.¹⁰⁹ The downside of relying on national press briefings was that the size of national press corps only spiked in times of crisis. Only one Canadian newspaper sent a special correspondent to London to cover the 1956 Conference; a far cry from the wartime Conference in 1944 when a dozen Canadian journalists had to be dissuaded from attending.¹¹⁰ Similarly, the pool of Commonwealth correspondents based in London gravitated to events held by new or controversial leaders, leaving other countries in the shade. During the September 1966 Conference, New Zealand held a drinks reception at The Savoy, to which a large number of Commonwealth and diplomatic correspondents were invited, but only one reporter showed up.¹¹¹ This was perhaps just as well, given Holyoake's record of making gaffes. In 1965 a journalist from the *Montreal Star* asked in regard to Vietnam why New Zealand's 'vital interests are more fundamentally affected than India for instance, which is so much closer'. Holyoake's replied 'well I haven't a map before me but I do not think that India is closer to Vietnam than New Zealand' – in fact New Zealand was over 3000 miles further away.¹¹²

Holyoake's blunder typified the amateur nature of the publicity efforts of many countries. After the 1964 Conference he was asked in the New Zealand House of Representatives if a public relations officer had even been assigned to assist him during his visit, after an article in London's *Daily Telegraph* described him as full of 'the sweet sounding but meaningless phrases which might be soothing to naïve New Zealanders who are used to being fed on straight political pap'.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ R.B. Bryce and G.S. Murray press conference, 8 March 1961, 'Diefenbaker correspondence January-March 1961', LAC MG31-E83, volume 4, R3969-599-6-E.

¹¹⁰ Robert Dunn to Pierre Asselin, 14 June 1956, 'Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - London, England - 1956 - Vol. 10 - Press', LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

¹¹¹ Holyoake diary, Friday 9 September, ANZ AECO 18656, PM11/2.

¹¹² Text of press conference at New Zealand House, 16 June 1965, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/147, LONB 65/3/1/A.

¹¹³ 'Harm to NZ image overseas', *New Zealand Herald*, 12 August 1964, Holyoake Papers, NLNZ MS-1814-283/6.

Holyoake did indeed have a public relations officer, Trevor Campbell, at the Conferences, but Campbell made some unusual choices regarding media outlets. For instance in 1961 he prioritised getting Holyoake to record a short film for the West Nigerian Television Service.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, New Zealand still deferred to British experts. During the September 1966 Conference, Campbell scheduled three sessions on 'television training' for Holyoake at Conservative Party headquarters, an interesting example of non-labour parties collaborating across national lines.¹¹⁵ At least Campbell was prepared to tell Holyoake that he was in need of training. A danger for new Commonwealth leaders was that their public relations staff were too sycophantic. The press secretary at Ghana House compiled daily reports for Nkrumah during the 1961 Conference, but these largely consisted of flattery and contradictory advice. For instance, on 14 March during debates over South Africa, he wrote 'Recommendations: Dr. Nkrumah's ultimatum is most commendable. Ghana's prestige has jumped sky high. Dr. Nkrumah's constructive militancy can now be distinguished from Mr. Nehru's senile moderation, Mr. Tunku's loud insincerity and Sir Balewa's sad confusion of mind'.¹¹⁶ The next day, during which Verwoerd withdrew South Africa's application, the Ghanaian Press Secretary wrote: 'Since Osagyefo has already stated his case so forcefully, it may not be necessary any longer to continue to be uncompromising. Political compromise is always a sign of maturity and statesmanship'.¹¹⁷ Advisors from new Commonwealth countries were often more protective of their leaders than those of older states. On 16 March the Ghanaian press secretary wrote: 'The Times correspondent phoned me at 11pm last night to say that Dr. Nkrumah might issue a statement because Mr. Tunku and Mr. Menzies have both issued statements. I pointed out that it was too late in the night and that my President did not, as a rule, issue statements merely because others have done so'.¹¹⁸ This pompous response was a risky approach because

¹¹⁴ A.T. Campbell to External Affairs, 6 April 1961, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/128, LONB 53/15/4F.

¹¹⁵ Holyoake diary, Wednesday 7 September, in ANZ AECO 18656, PM 11/2.

¹¹⁶ Press secretary, Ghana House to Nkrumah, 14 March 1961, PRAAD RG 17/2/293.

¹¹⁷ Press secretary, Ghana House to Nkrumah, 15 March 1961, *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Press secretary, Ghana House to Nkrumah, 16 March 1961, *ibid.*

in the absence of a Ghanaian statement Malaya could have attempted to claim a greater share of the credit for forcing South Africa's withdrawal.

The amateurish public relations practiced by many delegations did have the benefit of adding to the informal feel of the Conferences. Prearranged press releases may have been couched in anodyne language, but not all interactions with the press could be controlled. At a press conference at Marlborough House during the September 1966 Conference, Pakistani High Commissioner Salman Ali commenced reading out the prepared text of the Foreign Minister Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada's speech on Kashmir, only for Indian public relations officers to interrupt and apprise the assembled press that the head of the Indian delegation, External Affairs Minister Sardar Swaran Singh, had objected to Kashmir being mentioned during plenary session and had successfully appealed to Wilson as chairman to shut down the debate. Secretary-General Arnold Smith eventually intervened, confirming that Wilson had indeed ruled that Kashmir should not be discussed at a plenary session. The Indian public relations office boasted of their interjection in their annual report, stating that their actions 'caused dismay in the ranks of the Pakistani organisers ... [and] threw Salman Ali's press conference into utter confusion'. It was reported with pride that the BBC, ITV and five British newspapers reported on the incident.¹¹⁹ The competitive media market in Britain enabled stories to escalate rapidly from an offhand comment into a national conversation. In 1956 Kotelawala recalled that when asked at London airport about the price of tea, he said that 'the prices were "damn' ridiculous" and the fun began. For the next few days I was the most talked-of man in Britain'. Kotelawala's comment about tea merchants' markups led to a consumer outcry. He remarked that 'a reputable tea firm immediately reduced its prices by a good few pence'.¹²⁰ Just as the aggregation of foreign correspondents in London ensured the Conferences received greater attention in the

¹¹⁹ 'Annual publicity report for the year 1966', NAI HI/1011(48)/67.

¹²⁰ John Kotelawala, *An Asian Prime Minister's Story* (London, 1956), p. 159.

international press than if they were held elsewhere, the ability visiting leaders had to break into the domestic news cycle was undoubtedly part of the appeal of meeting in London

Conversely, the enduring conception of the Commonwealth as ‘not-foreign’ seemingly equipped Britons from the Archbishop of Canterbury down to opine on the Conferences as if they were a domestic political issue. In 1966 Archbishop Michael Ramsey declared that force could validly be used in Rhodesia; Hyam observed that ‘nothing so controversial had been uttered from the See of Canterbury since 1688’.¹²¹ Just as the feeling that Commonwealth remained a British sphere of influence emboldened the establishment, average Britons did not view visiting leaders as foreigners, nor did they see Commonwealth relations as a field reserved for diplomats; having a distant relative residing in the dominions appeared sufficient to make anyone an expert. St Laurent’s official papers include large folders of ‘unofficial correspondence’; unsolicited letters from the British public, written as if St Laurent was their local MP. For example in 1951 Mrs M.A. Riordan asked that ‘something be done by you, – either at the Commonwealth Conference or, in a private capacity with Mr. Attlee, to ease the financial restrictions on prospective emigrants’.¹²² Mrs Riordan was aware that it was British capital controls which limited the amount of currency emigrants could withdraw, yet she saw St Laurent as her best means of lobbying the Attlee government. An extreme example of the perception that visiting leaders were accessible was a letter from Mrs Louise Grieg of Wimbledon, requesting a meeting with St Laurent during the 1956 Conference so he could advise her on when to sell some Canadian mining stocks which she owned. Press officer Pierre Asselin gently replied that ‘I regret that I can do no more than suggest you consult a reputable broker’.¹²³ Such letters could be dismissed as the jottings of elderly ladies, but they nonetheless

¹²¹ Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire*, p. 367.

¹²² M.A. Riordan to St Laurent, 9 January 1951, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - Jan. 1951 - Vol. 2 - Unofficial’, LAC MG26-L, volume 84, file C-10-14.

¹²³ Pierre Asselin to Louise Grieg, 2 July 1956, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - London, England - 1956 - Vol. 10 - Press’, LAC MG26-L, volume 171, file C-18-17.

reveal how visiting prime ministers were seen as approachable figures. The ‘unofficial correspondence’ files also provide a snapshot of the rise and fall of alternative political movements. Before each Conference, St Laurent received a letter from McKinlay Hargreaves, who called for an Empire Cabinet in each capital, as a prelude to Imperial Federation and the foundation of a ‘universal cult’.¹²⁴ Unsurprisingly, his letters were marked ‘not for acknowledgement’, but so were the frequent mailings from Roland Muirhead, former President of the Scottish National Party. In 1951 he wrote ‘on behalf of the Scottish people to ask for your good offices in bringing upon the agenda of the imperial conference the question of restoring to Scotland self-government’.¹²⁵ It is striking that an issue once dismissed as being as eccentric as Imperial Federation became the subject of a close-run referendum in 2014.

It was not only fringe groups who invoked the Commonwealth to bolster their claims. Both major British political parties sought to present themselves as the custodians of the Commonwealth. The Conservative right looked to the Conferences to provide an excuse to oppose the terms of entry into the EEC. As the *Economist* put it before the 1962 Conference, there were between 40 and 50 of the 360 Conservative MPs who were ‘privately hoping it will soon become more respectable to say that the terms are not right. The sort of Commonwealth protest most likely to mobilise them would not be a too shrill cry of complaint ... but a deliberate, dignified, sad, slow shaking of heads by Mr. Menzies and Mr. Diefenbaker’.¹²⁶ Equally, the Labour left saw entry into Europe as the abandonment of moral obligations towards former colonies. They could point to statements of African leaders such as Obote, who during the 1964 Conference asked: ‘Are Britain’s economic difficulties so great that she must cease to be accepted by the coloured world as a leader of world opinion and be regarded merely

¹²⁴ McKinlay Hargreaves to St Laurent, 18 May 1947, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - 1953 (June) - Vol. 2 - Unofficial’, LAC MG26-L, volume 85, file C-10-21.

¹²⁵ R.E. Muirhead to St Laurent, 3 January 1951, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - Jan. 1951 - Vol. 2 - Unofficial’, LAC MG26-L, volume 84, file C-10-14.

¹²⁶ ‘Not since the Corn Laws?’, *Economist*, 1 September 1962.

as a leader of a racialist group?¹²⁷ In the first half of the 1960s, both parties were reluctant to sacrifice the ‘world role’ which the Commonwealth still nominally conferred upon Britain. The result was that the success of the Conferences was often measured by the extent to which it affected domestic politics. Manjit Singh of India House wrote that the 1964 Conference was considered a ‘great success’ by British organisers because they had avoided being pressured into a decision on Rhodesia in the lead up to the general election: ‘Sir Alec has secured a notable achievement in that the problem will probably have to be solved by his successor whereas he can bask in the glory of his achievement of having resurrected the Commonwealth’s image for his part just before going back to the polls’.¹²⁸ Under Harold Wilson the need to consider public opinion when forming Commonwealth policy became explicit. He often referred to the ‘four constituencies’ he had to take into account in regard to UDI: ‘Rhodesians’ opinion, opinion in the United Kingdom, the view of Commonwealth colleagues and world opinion’.¹²⁹ Wilson, the most openly political of British prime ministers in his chairmanship of the Conferences, made it clear in plenary sessions that he was only responsible for the line of his government, not British attitudes as a whole. At the 1969 Conference he deflected criticism of British immigration policy from Pakistani Foreign Minister Arshad Hussain by declaring: ‘He was sure that Mr. Hussain had no desire to attribute to him responsibility for the British press, whose sensationalism he acknowledged, nor for the statements of Mr. Enoch Powell, which were inevitably widely reported’.¹³⁰ The implication was that while Commonwealth leaders may object to the approach of his Labour government, they would find the alternatives even less appealing.

¹²⁷ ‘Dr Obote “seriously disturbed”: Believer in the Commonwealth’, *Rhodesia and Eastern Africa*, 22 September 1964, p. 60.

¹²⁸ Manjit Singh, Fortnightly political report 16th June to 15th July 1964, NAI 1960 6(56)R&I/60.

¹²⁹ Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), p. 390, in I.M. Cumpston, *The Evolution of the Commonwealth of Nations 1900-1980* (Canberra, 1997), p. 97.

¹³⁰ Third meeting, 8 January 1969, in TNA PREM 13/2539.

Wilson injected a dose of political reality to the Conferences by reminding his colleagues that he had to satisfy British public opinion in addition to their concerns. As much as he repudiated Powell, Wilson's attempts to play down Britain's status as 'first among equals' at the Conferences was itself a response to the Powellite view of the Commonwealth as a 'gigantic farce'. A series of articles in the *Times* during the 1964 Conference – written by Powell but attributed to 'A Conservative' – broke the bipartisan consensus that the Commonwealth was worth preserving. The thrust of the argument was that the Commonwealth no longer enhanced British prestige: 'The world does not admire us for worshipping "the ghost of the British Empire sitting crowned upon the grave thereof"'. Powell asserted that the mythology of a continuum between Empire and Commonwealth led to policies which could not be rationally explained and that the public would not have otherwise assented to: 'That British troops are deployed in Borneo in 1964 is as fantastical as it sounds; only a state of national hallucination could account for it'.¹³¹ There was undoubtedly an element of truth in Powell's analysis: as the Empire was never dissolved, the Commonwealth continued to be depicted to the British public as its synonym. For example, the graphic used by the *Observer* to illustrate its coverage of the 1962 Conference on the common market was unselfconsciously imperial: a crown being torn in two'.¹³² If a state of national hallucination in which Commonwealth was the peaceful fulfilment to Empire existed, it was profoundly shaken by UDI. The halo effect of continuity orderly handovers of power had provided was complicated by the contradiction of 'loyal rebellion'; white settlers professing loyalty to the Queen but renouncing Britain and the Commonwealth.¹³³ From this point onwards, the 'gigantic farce' school of thought quickly gained traction; by September 1966 the *Sunday Telegraph* was describing the Commonwealth in Powellite terms as a 'noble ghost', although conceding that there was 'no harm in holding a

¹³¹ 'A Conservative', 'Patriotism based in reality not in dreams', *Times* (London), 2 April 1964.

¹³² *Observer* (London), 9 September 1962, p. 9, Marshall Papers, NLNZ MS-1403-155/3.

¹³³ L.J. McFarlane, 'Justifying rebellion: Black and white nationalism in Rhodesia', *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, 6:1, (1968), p. 62.

séance for it from time to time, in the form of a Prime Ministers Conference'.¹³⁴ When the 1969 Conference convened, the *Telegraph's* line had hardened: along with the *Spectator*, it called for Britain to withdraw from the Commonwealth, arguing that 'It would free Britain from many embarrassments, illusions and distortions'.¹³⁵ While there was still enough residual public affection for the Commonwealth to make that politically impossible, Wilson elected to do the next best thing; to relinquish Britain's traditional role as host.

The hostile attitude of the British press in the latter half of the 1960s did not go unnoticed by visiting leaders. Eric Williams' report to Parliament after the 1965 Conference dwelt at length on the issue, observing 'One of the most striking aspects of the Conference was the view expressed by at least two reputable and influential newspapers in England that the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conferences should be abandoned'. Williams attributed this solely to British self-interest, asserting 'This view was based on their recognition that, with a predominance of non-European countries, the prime ministers conference could no longer be dominated or controlled by the United Kingdom'.¹³⁶ The reality was more complex. Meeting in London had countless advantages for visiting leaders – Eric Williams' publisher even suggested using the 1969 Conference to garner publicity for his autobiography – but what did Britain gain from hosting?¹³⁷ At earlier Conferences, British officials could use connections in Fleet Street to mould public preconceptions. Basil Robinson observed that in the run up to the 1962 Conference on the common market 'A more than usually hostile press-briefing operation was mounted in the London press, with the result that the Canadian prime minister was singled out as the principal obstacle to the United Kingdom objective – precisely the position which he had

¹³⁴ Douglas Brown, 'No more non-rabbits', *Sunday Telegraph* (London), 4 September 1966, McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-159.

¹³⁵ 'Press and the Prime Ministers: Fleet Street in search of the Empire', p. 278.

¹³⁶ 'Report by the Prime Minister on the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference', July 23 1965, EWMC MS 747.

¹³⁷ André Deutsch to Williams, 15 July 1968, EWMC MS 84.

been advised to avoid'.¹³⁸ By allowing himself to be lionised by the right-wing of Fleet Street – the *Daily Express* once ran seven photographs of him in a single edition – Diefenbaker was weighed down by the weight of public expectations.¹³⁹ His throwaway line on arrival at Heathrow about bringing 'alternatives' to the Conference was inflated by the press into hopes for a fully-formed scheme to rival the common market – making Diefenbaker's eventual call for a tariff conference in Canada particularly anticlimactic. Furthermore, the publicity Diefenbaker gained in Britain backfired in Canada; Progressive Conservative Senator Allister Grosart observed that 'strangely enough the reaction in Canada was "poor little Britain" the very opposite to what you would expect'.¹⁴⁰ Canadian Liberal MP Jack Pickersgill told Grosart that by being depicted as the enemy of British entry into the EEC, Diefenbaker had 'managed to get the Conservative Party tagged as anti-British. You're crazy'.¹⁴¹ Diefenbaker had been caught out by the British press before. They reported on his private meeting during the 1961 Conference with an African National Congress delegation led by Oliver Tambo – a fact which Denis Smith argued 'narrowed Diefenbaker's moral options' on apartheid.¹⁴² Controlling the media message became more difficult as the 1960s wore on, with thirty bickering delegations and mastheads whose editorial line favoured the complete abandonments of the Conferences.

Moreover, so long as British prime ministers retained their dual role as chairman and representative of British interests, they were constrained in their ability to fully employ some of the public relations tactics used by visiting leaders. Foremost of these was the ability to leak Conference documents to the press – as chairman, the British prime minister had to continue to denounce leaks even as they became a common tool of media management. As observed earlier in the chapter, the Prime Ministers' Conferences commenced in the 1940s under a veil

¹³⁸ H. Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto, 1989), p. 281.

¹³⁹ Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto, 1995), p. 301.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Stursberg, *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained, 1956-62* (Toronto, 1975), p. 165.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Smith, *Rogue Tory*, p. 362.

of secrecy; this did not prevent delegates briefing the press, or prime ministers being overly candid in their parliamentary statements, but it did mean that Conference documents themselves were considered sacrosanct. Copies of agendas and minutes were numbered and cross-referenced to distribution lists and generous use was made of 'top secret' labels. While there was never a golden era of confidentiality – periodic disclosures by Pakistan and India over Kashmir ensured that – until the 1960s most leakages were limited to matters of procedure or self-promotion. In 1960, George Ignatieff of the Canadian Department of External Affairs noted, without alarm, that articles in the *Times* were 'obviously' written with access to an agenda and timetable, which 'may have been leaked by one of the Commonwealth Houses ... apparently similar leakages occurred to The Times at the last Prime Minister's Conference'.¹⁴³ Similarly, leaders such as the Tunku who leaked the full text of their set speeches were an annoyance to the likes of Macmillan and Menzies, but this irritation was as much for giving scripted speeches in the first place as for releasing them after the fact for domestic consumption. Leakages only began to affect the fabric of the Conferences once delegations began to systematically reveal what other leaders had said. Richard Preston argued that there was an unwritten 'agreement not to report, interpret, or comment in public on any statements apart from their own', which began to break down during debates over the common market at the 1962 Conference, with Britain among the worst offenders.¹⁴⁴ In 1965 Wilson had to ward off accusations from Kenyan External Affairs Minister Joseph Murumbi that the *Evening Standard* was being leaked full records of Conference proceedings. Wilson tried to argue that the *Standard's* reports were pure guesswork and that even the British deputy prime minister did not receive same-day reports on proceedings, yet Murumbi still complained that the British papers were making suspiciously 'accurate guesses'.¹⁴⁵ Wilson did not, however, meekly accept the

¹⁴³ Ignatieff to Department of External Affairs, 25 April 1960, 'Commonwealth Prime Minister's meeting - 1960', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, part 3, 50085-H-40.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Preston, *Canada in World Affairs 1959 to 1961* (Toronto, 1965), p. 472.

¹⁴⁵ Charles Craw, 'Notes on Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting', 18 June 1965, ANZ ABHS 22310 W5631/245, PAR 323/3/1.

notion that he was liable for what was leaked to Fleet Street. At the September 1966 Conference, he declared that there was no point in continuing the meeting if leakages continued. One delegate told the *Christchurch Press* that Wilson ‘actually threatened to adjourn it for three months’ – which was itself an example of a delegate disclosing what another prime minister had said.¹⁴⁶

By 1966 an additional threat to confidentiality had emerged. Rhodesian Information Services ran an extensive public relations operation besmirching opponents of UDI. A pamphlet such as ‘Commonwealth Conference a Travesty’ could have been safely ignored as propaganda, except for the fact that its account of internal Conference discussions was uncannily accurate. For example, in one plenary session the Tunku had commented that the Smith government had de facto control in Rhodesia; this enabled the Rhodesian pamphlet to extrapolate that: ‘A temperate thought was shown by Tunku Abdul Rahman, who gave it as his opinion that Rhodesia was independent ... he was well aware that Rhodesia sent her military personnel in 1951-52 to help his people in their struggle for freedom’.¹⁴⁷ During the September 1966 Conference, staff from Rhodesia House endeavoured to bribe junior delegates, and by February 1967 they had been successful in obtaining a full copy of the minutes.¹⁴⁸ The issue became acute when the *Daily Telegraph* and former Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys also appeared to have access to a copy; Sandys denied receiving his copy via Rhodesia House but the Wilson government nonetheless sought legal advice as to whether anyone could be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act for the leak. However the advice pointed out that a person could only be prosecuted under the Act if ‘holding office under Her Majesty’ – which would exclude non-British staff of the Commonwealth Secretariat if the leak had originated there, although it was

¹⁴⁶ ‘PM disappointed with conference: against appeasements of Africans’, *Press* (Christchurch), ANZ AAWV 23583 Kirk1/2.

¹⁴⁷ Rhodesian Information Services, *For the Record No. 9: Commonwealth Conference a Travesty* (Salisbury, 1967).

¹⁴⁸ Background note, 20 March 1967, in ‘Security. Leak of minutes of meetings of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, 1966: Duncan Sandys MP’s parliamentary question’. TNA PREM 13/1797.

noted the monarchical language of the Act suggested staff seconded from Commonwealth realms could come under the Act.¹⁴⁹ The layers of loopholes, exemptions and speculation exemplified the confusion which reigned in the second half of the 1960s, when both the Secretariat and host nation shared responsibility for Conference administration. Even senior officials at the Commonwealth Office seemed uncertain whether the minutes should be considered a British document, a Secretariat document, or both.¹⁵⁰ In such an atmosphere, the safest course of action was to assume that almost all material would leak. Private Secretary for foreign affairs at No. 10, Arthur Michael Palliser, argued before the 1966 Conference that the scheduling of the Rhodesia item should take leaks into account; he wrote that there would be ‘presentational advantage’ in addressing Rhodesia on the first day ‘since it meant that such guidance as we give to the press (or leakages to this) would deal mainly in the following mornings papers, with the British case’.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Palliser advised against Minister without Portfolio George Thompson giving a long speech on Rhodesia at the 1969 Conference, partly because ‘Excessive length might lead to criticism that we were filibustering’, but mostly because ‘It must be expected that whatever Mr. Thomson said would leak’.¹⁵² Working on the assumption that everything would leak was pragmatic, but it was also fatal to the idea of the Conferences as a forum for cabinet-style debate. In addition to the lack of confidentiality, the predominance of prepared speeches further decreased the chances of a dynamic debate emerging. Once relieved of hosting responsibilities, even Britain conceded the principle of not releasing speeches to journalists. In 1971 in Singapore, both British and foreign reporters were given full summaries of Heath’s speeches on the same day as they were delivered.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ T.G. Hetherington, background note on legal aspects, 16 February 1967, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Note by Commonwealth Office, 24 February 1967, *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Palliser to O.G. Forster, 4 September 1966, TNA PREM 13/782.

¹⁵² Palliser to D.P.R. Kackiligin, 2 January 1969, TNA CAB 164/413.

¹⁵³ British High Commission, Singapore, to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 15 January 1971, TNA FCO 68/345.

Leakages in the press and attempted bribery by Rhodesian officials may have been sources of frustration to the organisers, but they at least implied that the Conferences were producing material that was newsworthy and worth pursuing. In a sense, any publicity was good publicity for an organisation which until 1965 had no institutional form. It did not necessarily matter if the coverage that visiting leaders received in their domestic media was parochial as long as it preserved the notion that the Conferences were a worthy international stage. Indian and Pakistani newspapers traded barbs about each other's leaders, which had the effect of pressuring each prime minister to attend in person rather than cede precedence to the other by sending a deputy. Karachi's English-language daily, *Dawn*, attacked Nehru's administration before the 1957 Conference: 'If it were not for Bharat [India] overspending at the expense of sterling area countries ... the area would have a trading surplus with the non-sterling world this year'.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile Karachi's Urdu masthead, *Jang*, carried a rumour that Britain was proposing to equip Pakistan, Kenya and Malaya with nuclear weapons, and that Nehru was attending the Conference to oppose the plan.¹⁵⁵ Such a claim was fantastical, but it must have nonetheless suggested to the newspaper's readership that the Conference was a vital event at which big strategic decisions were taken. Similarly, in 1956 Malcolm McDonald observed that the interest in the Conferences in the Indian press was driven by a feeling that India had increasing sway over the direction of the Commonwealth. He noted that one cartoon depicted Nehru towering above the other prime ministers and being greeted by Eden saying 'you've grown bigger since we last met'.¹⁵⁶ Another regional rivalry played out once Caribbean nations joined the Commonwealth, with the British High Commissioner to Jamaica commenting that:

Jamaicans generally took grave exception to Dr Williams' television broadcast in London in which he appeared to be speaking for the whole of the British Caribbean when he said that the Commonwealth meant little for this part of the world. At the

¹⁵⁴ 'Bharat bankrupting C'wealth: Row expected at premiers meeting', *Dawn*, 2 June 1957, TNA DO 35/5174.

¹⁵⁵ British High Commission, Pakistan to CRO, 26 June 1957, TNA DO 35/6225.

¹⁵⁶ Malcolm McDonald to CRO, 22 August 1956, in 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, London June-July 1956; reactions to conference', TNA DO 35/5171.

same time, Jamaica incurred the wrath of Trinidad by Mr Sangster's failure to support Dr Williams' proposals, at the conference, in respect of British Guiana.¹⁵⁷

This use of the Conference as a backdrop for regional disputes suggested sensitivity over how Caribbean prime ministers represented their country and region in Britain, perhaps laced with a fear that British audiences still perceived the West Indies as a federal unit, and assumed one West Indian leader was broadly the same as another. Coverage in other Commonwealth capitals also fixated on how local leaders were depicted by Fleet Street. In 1956, the *Times of Karachi* published an article complaining that Mohammed Ali's speeches had been given insufficient space in the London press.¹⁵⁸ In 1960 the same newspaper repeated its complaint; after claiming that Ayub Khan's speeches were under-reported in London, it retaliated by refusing to publish any accounts of Princess Margaret's wedding.

Underlying such editorial choices in Commonwealth capitals was a feeling that the way in which they were depicted in the metropole still mattered. The Canadian High Commissioner to Pakistan noted in 1960 that the Conference was the first time Ayub had travelled further than the Middle East whilst President: 'People were anxious to know what impression he would make in a country such as England ... there was, perhaps some understandable self congratulation about the President's performance'.¹⁵⁹ In 1962, the Conference served as Trinidad and Tobago's debut on the international stage, coming just ten days after independence. It provided the lead headline for the *Trinidad Guardian* for all but one day of the Conference's duration, and much of the newspaper's content was syndicated from London, including cartoons by David Low.¹⁶⁰ Even for old Commonwealth countries, London remained centre stage. Of the visits of Australian prime ministers to the United States during the period,

¹⁵⁷ 11 November 1964, FO 371/173580, in S.R. Ashton and David Killingray (eds), *British Documents on the End of Empire - The West Indies* (London, 1999), p. 225.

¹⁵⁸ Morrice James, British High Commissioner, Karachi, to Snelling, 16 July 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

¹⁵⁹ Canadian High Commission, Karachi, to Department of External Affairs, 24 May 1960, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1960', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4779, part 3, 50085-H-40.

¹⁶⁰ *Trinidad Guardian*, 9-20 September 1962.

no less than eight were on the way to or from a Prime Minister's Conference, as compared to one visit for the purpose of attending the UN General Assembly.¹⁶¹ In a similar way, while less important to Britain in policy terms than other gatherings, such as summits with the United States and the Soviet Union, the Prime Ministers' Conferences nonetheless had a unique impact upon the British psyche. They were the occasions at which the narrative of decolonisation became tangible. Rather than being relegated to newsreels of flag-lowering ceremonies, during the Conferences the leaders of former dependencies entered the British home via radio and television broadcasts – and unlike European visitors, their voices were unmediated by interpreters. The aftermath of Empire made Commonwealth affairs a concern of the British press in a way which those of other European former colonies could never be. For instance, in 1964 the *Guardian* denounced the dismissal of Ghanaian Chief Justice Sir Arku Korsah as placing Ghana 'second in infamy only to South Africa'.¹⁶² The Commonwealth remained central to self-assessments of Britain's world role – as Hyam put it, until the end of Wilson's first term as prime minister the Commonwealth was 'still at the core of British "official mind" cosmology, and of external activity, throwing up nasty problems requiring urgent attention in a way that Europe did not'.¹⁶³ Moreover, the episodic structure of the Conferences meant they induced periodic bouts of anxiety over Britain's international prestige. Hyam argued that British decolonisation was characterised by an emphasis on pragmatism and prestige, and asserted that there was a 'historically important calculation after 1959 that on balance "holding on" would be more damaging to prestige than giving up, and certainly more expensive'.¹⁶⁴ Yet the voluntary nature of the Commonwealth – the very attribute which had made it palatable for former colonies – also made it impossible to wind down. Having used the Commonwealth as a palliative

¹⁶¹ United States Department of State, 'Australia – Visits by Foreign Leaders – Department History – Office of the Historian', accessed 8 March 2016, at <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/australia>

¹⁶² *Guardian*, 2 January 1964, in Kwesi Armah, 'The pursuit of peace without power: Ghana's foreign policy 1957-1966', MLitt thesis (Oxford, 1981), p. 98.

¹⁶³ Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, p. 328.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

for public perceptions at the end of Empire, Britain could not give it up even if it had outlived its original purpose. It did not matter whether the Conferences were being decried by former imperial hardliners for being too much of an imposition or were being denounced by anti-apartheid and anti-UDI protestors as not interventionist enough – both sides were giving oxygen to a fragile body.

The protests which the Conferences attracted during the 1960s were a headache for the host nation, and, as the first chapter notes, one of the primary reasons why Britain declined to continue as host into the 1970s. Yet the acts of dissent – from the cries of ‘murder, murder’ as Louw left South Africa House in 1960 to the attempts to occupy Australia House in 1969 to oppose the Vietnam War – were also a sign of continued public engagement with Commonwealth affairs.¹⁶⁵ The number of protesters may have been few, but they did have a political impact. Wilson had attended anti-apartheid rallies in opposition, but was less supportive once in power. The CRO told New Zealand officials that while there was possibility that a British minister might attend a rally during the 1965 Conference, there was ‘only one and she would not be encouraged’; a rather pointed comment when the only female minister was Barbara Castle, Minister for Overseas Development.¹⁶⁶ However the Commonwealth rarely became an object of vitriol for the left, even though it could have easily been branded as a neo-colonial project. Stephen Howe has written on the surprising absence of decolonisation as a theme in British folk music or radical culture, asking ‘where were the protest songs?’.¹⁶⁷ Specific causes such as Rhodesia and South Africa were taken up, but the multi-racial rhetoric of the Commonwealth was successful enough to ensure that calls for its disbandment usually

¹⁶⁵ ‘Mr Louw declares “no abdication”’, *Times* (London), 5 May 1960, TNA PREM 11/2909; Phillip Allen to Burke Trend, 31 December 1968, TNA HO 325/142.

¹⁶⁶ New Zealand House, London to Department of External Affairs, 30 April 1965, ANZ ABHS 7148 W5503/149, LONB 65/3/1/B.

¹⁶⁷ Stephen Howe, ‘When (if ever) did Empire end?: “internal decolonisation” in British culture since the 1950s’, in Martin Lynn (ed.), *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 231.

emanated from the right. Thus it was the Commonwealth idealists who proved predominant; the Conferences survived and morphed into CHOGM, whose gatherings in the 1970s and 1980s played a modest, but not immaterial, role in bringing about the end of apartheid. The protesters of the past became part of the Commonwealth establishment. Abdul Minty of the South African Foreign Affairs Department boasted in the 1999 that ‘Since 1960, I was involved, on behalf of the British anti-apartheid movement, in lobbying the Commonwealth and was able to attend every summit, except two, until our democratic transformation in 1994. Thereafter I participated as part of the South African delegation’.¹⁶⁸

Yet it should not be forgotten that for the majority of the period most of the British public looked on the Commonwealth uncritically, as a synonym for the Empire or an excuse for a sporting carnival – as demonstrated by the use of the title ‘British Empire and Commonwealth Games’ from 1954 to 1966 to describe the quadrennial sporting event. Just as they were commonly dubbed the ‘friendly games’, so too could the Conferences be seen as a ‘friendly’ version of international diplomacy. Instead of protest songs, the Commonwealth was a target for gentle ridicule. In 1964 comic duo Flanders and Swann sang ‘Let the nations of the world all meet together, face to face/In the bath, In the bath/With Verwoerd, and Kenyatta, and all those other chaps/Nkrumah, and Nabarro, we’ll get some peace perhaps’. Aside from the unappealing mental imagery, it is striking how the three leaders (Conservative MP Gerald Nabarro presumably being added for alliteration) were presented as household names – Jomo was far more familiar to the British public than his son Uhuru is as President of Kenya since 2013. Even in the 1970s, the Conferences could be a topic of light entertainment. During the 1973 CHOGM in Ottawa, Judith Bruce composed a ditty for BBC One programme *That’s Life* comparing its delegates unfavourably to those who regularly appeared at the London

¹⁶⁸ Abdul S. Minty in Greg Mills and John Stremlau (eds), *The Commonwealth in the 21st Century* (Johannesburg, 1999), p. 57.

Conferences. She sang: ‘come back Robert Menzies with your manner and your smile, come back Sir Roy Welensky with your swagger and your style ... you really were the finest of the fine’.¹⁶⁹ This may have been mild satire of, rather than genuine nostalgia for, the former Prime Minister of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (although Welensky approvingly passed the lyrics to Menzies), but it again showed how familiar such figures were to a mainstream audience.

This chapter has demonstrated that popular attitudes did not transition seamlessly from imperialism to internationalism. As Mansergh noted, ‘It was some time before possessive imperial attitudes, expressed for example in references to “our Commonwealth” disappeared’. In 1961, after seven years as Indian High Commissioner in London, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit commented that ‘that you cannot run a Commonwealth as you run an Empire’.¹⁷⁰ By the end of the decade, it was clear that Britain didn’t want to run a Commonwealth either, but the concept still carried great weight with the public. Ending its customary role as host of the Conferences arguably moved the weight of Commonwealth symbolism in Britain onto the Queen, who reassured the public in her 1972 Christmas speech, on the eve of British entry into the EEC, that ‘the new links with Europe will not replace those with the Commonwealth, they cannot alter our historical and personal attachments with kinsmen and friends overseas’.¹⁷¹ It is impossible for this chapter to cover the multitude of narratives the Prime Ministers’ Conferences furnished overseas in the period 1944-1969. For some countries, such as Canada, it was a similar tale of homogeneity giving way to collaboration. In 1962 Diefenbaker made the ambitious historical claim that ‘We have a particular interest in maintaining the strength of the Commonwealth’ because it was through Canadian Confederation that ‘that the concept of an international partnership under one queen first took form’.¹⁷² In other capitals it was a more

¹⁶⁹ Ian Farquharson to Welensky, 16 August 1973, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, box 421, folder 1.

¹⁷⁰ Mansergh, *Commonwealth Experience*, p. 403.

¹⁷¹ Tom Fleming (ed.), *Voices Out of the Air: The Royal Christmas Broadcasts, 1932-1981* (London, 1981), p. 124.

¹⁷² Press conference at London airport, 7 September 1962, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - Communique and Press Briefings - 1962’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, R3969-627-7-E.

straightforward tale of national leaders using the forum to grow in stature. Yet the fact remains that the Conferences were formative for even the most intellectual of leaders. At the 1962 Conference Eric Williams noted that Trinidad and Tobago ‘was hardly nine days old, don’t expect us to do more than rock the cradle at this stage’.¹⁷³ Therefore, even if the Commonwealth strikes the modern eye as a minor aspect of the international arena, this should not disguise the way the Conferences were used by many countries in the period to create or refashion their international identity. Thus the Conferences were both a transnational and domestic space: the global profile enabled leaders to build multilateral relationships, while newspapers and broadcasting heightened the domestic, ‘family’ feel of the Conferences by bringing them into the living room of the general public.

¹⁷³ ‘Williams favours united Europe’, *Trinidad Guardian*, 8 September 1962..

Chapter Six:

Communiqués and Consequences

‘...communiqués are not very illuminating. It is quite an art to read them – an art that depends on an understanding of the nature, procedure and purpose of Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meetings’.¹

As Gordon Walker’s quotation concedes, Commonwealth communiqués were ineffective in their most obvious function: to make plain to the public what took place in the private meetings. Instead of providing a definitive, accessible record, communiqués were replete with ambiguities and assumed knowledge – hence the ‘art’ of deciphering the documents for public consumption. The capacity of the Commonwealth to couch itself in vagaries was a reliable source of humour for Conference delegates. After the Colombo meeting of foreign ministers in 1950, Pearson joked that ‘if, at the time of Magna Carta, a communiqué had been issued from Runnymede, it would probably have said: “There has been a full and friendly discussion of feudal rights, and the conference decided to make some recommendations to King John”’.² Similarly, it was easy to point to the increase in the length of the communiqués as a cover for the narrowing of consensus; they expanded from two to ten pages in the decade 1955-1965. Nonetheless, it was significant that the ‘art form’ of communiqué interpretation continued to be practiced; the fact that commentators and critics read between the lines implied that there was still something worth reading. Likewise, that the prime ministers never abandoned the issue of communiqués, even though they caused much of the conflict in plenary sessions, was an indication of their importance. In a group bound together by little more than precedent, it was essential to have a published record to refer to. Minor changes in wording could point to major policy changes,

¹ Patrick Gordon Walker, ‘When the Prime Ministers Meet’, *New Commonwealth*, 8 June 1956.

² Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Co-operation and Post-War Change 1939-1952* (London, 1958), p. 415.

such as Britain's pledge to not grant independence to Rhodesia before majority rule in the September 1966 communiqué. Every word of the communiqués was contested because each one built on those before. This chapter will demonstrate that the communiqués are a useful prism through which to view the development and decline of the Commonwealth. The displacement of stirring wartime rhetoric with anodyne platitudes may make for dull reading, but the equivocal language employed in later communiqués was itself a sign that its drafting had been lively. The chapter will show that the communiqués were genuinely the product of the prime ministers, rather than being a bureaucratic creation which they rubber stamped. Attempts by individual delegations to insert opt-out clauses or dispense with communiqués altogether provide signs of where tensions were greatest in a growing Commonwealth. The chapter will also consider the extent to which communiqués were binding on signatories and led to discernible changes in outcomes.

Menzies argued in 1955 that a distinguishing feature of Prime Ministers' Conferences was that they did not need to have policy consequences. Unlike other 'summit' meetings where 'nations meet as strangers and, if their meeting is advertised, they know that they must produce some result or the world will say "this is a failure"...we don't need to do that. We have all been born out of the sovereignty of the crown'.³ This was a typically royalist rendering from Menzies, but accurate inasmuch as Commonwealth communiqués did not have to spell out treaty obligations or set up a framework for future meetings; all that was necessary was to acknowledge the monarch as ceremonial head and pay homage to a 'sense of concord' amongst member states.⁴ Menzies' following statement was more problematic: 'A Conference may produce nothing more than some communiqué that my old friend Phillip Swinton produces. What will it matter? The fact will still be that we have come here and we have refreshed our minds and our spirits'.⁵ It

³ Speech to Australia Club Dinner, 31 January 1955, Papers of Sir Arthur Tange, NAA A1838 899/6/2/1.

⁴ 1953 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 39.

⁵ Speech to Australia Club Dinner, Tange Papers, NAA A1838 899/6/2/1.

was true that for some leaders a major aspect of the Conferences was the ‘mental refreshment’ they provided.⁶ On three separate occasions in 1967 the Tunku told D.B.G. McLean, New Zealand’s Deputy High Commissioner to Malaysia, that he was keen for a Conference to be convened – partly to seek a solution on Rhodesia but mostly because London was ‘one of the few places where he can have a real holiday’. McLean agreed that ‘Since not too much work ever got done at these conferences it would be a good chance’.⁷ Yet on occasion the communiqué was the vehicle for reaching a resolution. When the 1949 Conference accepted that India could remain in the Commonwealth as a republic, it was initially seen as inevitable that two communiqués would need to be issued: one by India accepting the King as Head of the Commonwealth, and one by the other members reaffirming that their relationship to the monarch had not changed. This would have given the impression of a treaty being entered into by two different sides. It was only when the Canadian delegation redrafted the two statements as a single declaration that the impasse was ended. Indian fears that a single communiqué would imply a continued constitutional link were assuaged by describing the King as the symbol of their free association and ‘as such’ the Head of the Commonwealth.⁸ Thus, while the pedantry of debates over drafting was often mocked, the ability of the communiqués to secure lasting change through the addition of phrases as subtle as ‘as such’ underscored the valuable role they played in enabling the Commonwealth to employ novel solutions, like a republic accepting the symbolic headship of its former emperor.

Furthermore, it was erroneous for Menzies to insinuate that the communiqué was ‘produced’ by British ministers such as Lord Swinton. Prime Ministers jealously guarded their right to compose and reject drafts. In 1951 the chief drafter was Menzies himself, who along with Nehru

⁶ Judith Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (Newhaven, 2003), p. 244.

⁷ D.B.G. McLean to Secretary, Department of External Affairs Wellington, 21 March 1967, ANZ ABHS 20358 W5400/85, KL 90/3/2.

⁸ Vernon Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (Oxford, 1995), p. 264.

was charged by his colleagues with summarising their discussions. Holland argued that the communiqué should be preceded by a ‘declaration’ and have an emphasis on defence – reaffirming cooperation with the United States but also seeking to ‘show the world’ that Commonwealth countries, ‘with their resources of man-power and materials’, could still ‘successfully resist attack’.⁹ Nehru was reluctant, arguing that a declaration must be ‘something more’ than a typical communiqué and ‘if inadequate, would be better not made’.¹⁰ He was supported by Senanayake, who thought ‘it would be particularly unfortunate if the declaration included any principles which circumstances might later make it necessary to retract’.¹¹ The compromise proffered by Attlee was a typical British fudge: a declaration would be issued alongside the communiqué, with principles ‘which, though they might appear as platitudes to those familiar with the subject, would not necessarily appear so to the rest of the world’.¹² In spite of such duplicity, the declaration was more than platitudinous. Drawing on Holland’s desire to acknowledge the United States’ contribution, the declaration stated ‘it has been their privilege to be able to work closely with the United States of America, whose efforts in the direction of assisting many war-stricken nations are warmly regarded’.¹³ This was one of the most positive references to the United States which Nehru assented to at a Conference. The declaration also included one of the last mentions of mutual defence in any communiqué: ‘so long as the fear of aggression exists, we will have to strengthen our defences with all speed and diligence. This may well result in placing heavy burdens upon our peoples’.¹⁴ Conversely, commentators suspected the ‘hand of Nehru’ in the declaration’s assurance of non-interference in the affairs of the Soviet Union and China, and its invitation to Stalin and Mao to hold talks with other world leaders: ‘we should, in the name of common humanity, make a supreme effort

⁹ Eleventh meeting, 11 January 1951, TNA CAB 133/90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ 1951 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

to see clearly into each other's hearts and minds'.¹⁵ The declaration even included an early acknowledgement of the Commonwealth's multiracial basis, speaking of a 'faith in justice which derives added strength from the fact that at our meeting it has been simply and sincerely expressed by men of different races, traditions and creeds'.¹⁶ T.E. Dönges, head of the South Africa delegation, was given the usual assurance that nothing in the declaration implied any infringement upon South Africa's domestic jurisdiction, but it was nonetheless significant that he acquiesced to a statement which referred to 'embracing nations and peoples from every continent'.¹⁷

In short, the 1951 declaration may have been the apex of the form; Menzies' personal draft was accepted as the basis of the text, and was improved by contributions and concessions from other leaders.¹⁸ The importance placed on the wording of the communiqué was demonstrated in 1951 by the leaders agreeing to meet for an extra day to assess the final draft – a reminder of the genuine informality of the Conferences of the period.¹⁹ Unlike later decades, where the dozens of leaders present would have made an extension difficult, adding an extra day to proceedings in 1951 was done instantly by mutual agreement. There was no suggestion of leaving the final stage of drafting to junior ministers or officials. Moreover, the backdrop of the Korean War permitted more evocative language to be used in the declaration; proclamations of being 'solemnly' and 'jointly' 'pledged to peace' appeared less grandiose during an international conflict.²⁰ A comparable trait was in evidence in the wartime declaration of 1944 where the prime ministers committed to the 'defeat and downfall of our cruel, barbarous foes', and undertook to 'bring to the speediest end the agony of mankind'.²¹ Similarly in 1944, foreign

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Twelfth meeting, 12 January 1951, in TNA CAB 133/90.

¹⁹ Eleventh meeting, 11 January 1951, *ibid.*

²⁰ 1951 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 33.

²¹ 1944 declaration, *ibid.*, p. 13.

policy differences between dominions were elided so that the communiqué could simply state ‘here too we are in complete agreement’; prime ministers such as Smuts and King were unlikely to have accepted this in peacetime.²² The 1944 communiqué also bore the rhetorical cues of its chairman. There was a Churchillian absolutism to its vow to the Commonwealth’s allies: ‘not one who marches with us shall be abandoned’.²³ When Churchill returned to the prime ministership in 1951, a flavour of his oratory returned to the communiqués. Just as the prime ministers ‘rejoiced at the unquenchable spirit’ of the allied forces in 1944, in 1953 they met ‘a time of general rejoicing’ for the Coronation.²⁴ The 1953 communiqué sweepingly asserted that concord ‘exists between all the governments and peoples of the Commonwealth’, which would have doubtlessly surprised Kashmiris or non-white South Africans.²⁵

Churchill’s vivid imagery lent an eloquence to the communiqués which was not reflected in the content. After his retirement, and as India and Ceylon moved more firmly towards non-alignment, it became more difficult to use vivid imagery to paper over a lack of agreement. At the eleventh session of the 1956 Conference, Nehru pushed for the communiqué to espouse the recognition of communist China by the UN, arguing ‘there would be justifiable criticism if there was no reference to them in the final statement’.²⁶ He made the provocative claim that ‘Had she been a member some years ago the course of history might well have been altered; for example, the Korean war might never have occurred’.²⁷ Holland opposed specifying China by name and instead put forward an amendment which was typical of the non-committal language of the communiqués: ‘the matter might perhaps be mentioned in more general terms, for example by stating that the Commonwealth prime ministers had welcomed the recent increase

²² Margaret Ball, *The ‘Open’ Commonwealth* (Durham, N.C., 1971), pp. 114-5.

²³ 1944 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; 1953 communiqué, *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Eleventh meeting, 5 July 1956, TNA CAB 133/148.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

in the membership of the UN and that they would wish to see all peoples represented in that organisation'.²⁸ Nehru raised the issue again the next day, arguing that 'the passage about the broadening of the membership of the UN should be expanded'.²⁹ This time St Laurent led the opposition, invoking the Mackenzie King formula that 'it would be inappropriate to include ... anything which might be construed as committing individual government in advance to a particular course of action'.³⁰ Once Menzies and Holland repeated their objections, Nehru agreed to 'not press his proposal'.³¹ Thus the published communiqué said nothing about the UN other than expressing 'the hope that its membership could be broadened still further so that it might command a wider allegiance throughout the world' – the low modality of the sentence weakening the expression still further.³² Nonetheless, the intense debate over two days demonstrated that the communiqués were firmly the creation of the prime ministers rather than a précis scripted by officials. Indeed, advisors were sidelined from the process after initial drafting. At the 1960 Conference, the Secretary of the New Zealand External Affairs Ministry, Alister McIntosh, complained that 'they had worked late last night and produced a draft which would be passed round, unfortunately there were copies for prime ministers only and none were available for the officials. We were therefore unable to follow much of the discussion that followed'.³³ Officials could provide an outline, but it was left to leaders to determine the turn of phrase that they would put their name to.

One tool which was often used to add lustre was to elevate the communiqué by rebranding it as a 'declaration'. This trope was employed at the 1944 Conference. Cabinet Secretary Edward Bridges informed Alan Lascelles, King George VI's private secretary, that 'The prime ministers

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Twelfth meeting, 6 July 1956, *ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² 1956 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 50.

³³ 'Notes on thirteenth meeting held on Friday 13 May', McIntosh Papers, NLNZ MS-6759-122.

have decided that on the conclusion of this series of meetings they should, instead of a communiqué, issue a rather more formal document'.³⁴ However, formal did not mean more stilted, but rather more concise and declamatory, unlike Imperial Conference communiqués which had been lengthy and bureaucratic. At the 1937 Imperial Conference, when Mackenzie King of Canada and Savage of New Zealand argued over appeasement, Savage wanted the line that there should 'not be recourse to force' omitted.³⁵ The only way out of the deadlock was 'the classical device of a footnote to the communiqué'.³⁶ The 1944 declaration sought to avoid such provisos. It laid heavy emphasis on unity, even using the ungainly term 'unitedly' to reaffirm that 'we are unitedly resolved to continue, shoulder to shoulder with our Allies, all needful exertions'.³⁷ The only concession was to King, by saying foreign 'policies' rather than foreign 'policy'; Attlee, deputising for Churchill as chairman, had aimed for the word 'policy' by stating, 'we are all agreed', only for King to interject 'no', although even he conceded that 'our policies would converge'.³⁸ Other than this use of plurals, efforts in 1944 to issue a pithy, unifying declaration rather than a protracted communiqué were successful. The declaration even claimed that the Commonwealth had been 'welded' together by the two World Wars.³⁹ In 1946 however, the prime ministers were never assembled together at the same time, leaving the communiqué with a more quotidian role of linking together their disparate sessions into a single document. In 1949 the decision to retain India in the Commonwealth as a republic was described as a declaration, positioning it as the successor to the Balfour Declaration of the 1926 Imperial Conference, and establishing the distinction between communiqué and declaration. The successful incorporation of a declaration into the 1951 communiqué further entrenched the concept. Thus, the temptation arose to use declarations more frequently than their subject

³⁴ Bridges to Lascelles, 15 May 1944, TNA CAB 21/852.

³⁵ James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto, 1965), p. 58.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁷ 1944 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 13.

³⁸ Pickersgill (ed.), *The Mackenzie King Record: Volume 1, 1939-1944* (Toronto, 1960), p. 686, in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto, 1972), p. 206-7.

³⁹ 1944 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 14.

matter warranted. In 1961, a declaration on disarmament was included in the communiqué, but was overshadowed by South Africa's departure which was not addressed in the final communiqué. As a brief statement had been issued on the day of South Africa withdrew its application, Verwoerd argued that the issue did not need to be repeated in the final communiqué. Therefore the 1961 Conference hardly reads as the milestone of multiracialism which it was subsequently portrayed as – all the communiqué said was that 'the Prime Ministers also discussed certain constitutional questions relating to Commonwealth membership'.⁴⁰ Verwoerd's signature remained on the declaration on disarmament which immediately followed the reference to South Africa's withdrawal in the 1961 communiqué. It was hard to maintain the pretence that the declaration was the most magisterial form of Commonwealth document when one of its signatories had already signalled his withdrawal from the membership.

The 1961 declaration was eye-catching in its aim for 'nothing less than the complete abolition of the means of waging war of any kind'.⁴¹ It espoused the rapid abolition of nuclear weapons, the eventual reduction of national armed forces to a level sufficient only for internal security and the establishment of an international force under the UN. However, the declaration lacked the essential quality of being something that the Commonwealth could play a substantive role in bringing about. Declarations during the Second World War and Korean War had obvious applicability to the participation of Commonwealth countries in those two conflicts, and the 1949 London declaration on Indian membership was exclusively a Commonwealth matter. However, the 1961 declaration contained no specific commitments from Britain, the Commonwealth's only nuclear power, nor any indication of how other Commonwealth countries could assist in the disarmament process, for instance as part of a multilateral inspection team. The idealistic declaration may have been politically advantageous for

⁴⁰ 1961 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 68.

⁴¹ 1961 statement on disarmament, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 69.

Diefenbaker, who had begun to look for an excuse to refuse America's request to station nuclear warheads on Canadian soil, but the document was contradicted in practice by the Macmillan government which was anxiously seeking ways to maintain, rather than disband, its independent nuclear deterrent.⁴² British officials had been reluctant to even broach the subject of disarmament at the Conference, with Norman Brook fearing that United States President John F. Kennedy would 'certainly resent any suggestion that the United Kingdom government had reached firm conclusions at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting about disarmament'.⁴³ Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary Frederick Hoyer-Millar had argued to the inter-departmental co-ordinating committee that: 'It would be a mistake to aim at a declaration of a Commonwealth policy on disarmament, even if it could be achieved ... we should not be able to divulge our latest proposals on disarmament to Commonwealth Prime Ministers in any detail. These proposals chiefly affected the Americans and must first be discussed with the United States authorities'.⁴⁴ Prioritising America over the Commonwealth could be interpreted as the typical Foreign Office line, but it may also explain why the declaration was utopian; the text needed to be bereft of practicality to avoid antagonising the Americans. While British officials counselled against issuing declarations if possible, British ministers continued to advocate using them to lend gravitas to the Conferences. In 1962 Commonwealth Secretary Sandys thought it 'would be useful if some "declaration" could emerge from this meeting'.⁴⁵ However Brook struggled to find a suitable subject. A declaration on colonial policy was deemed 'inexpedient' and when the official committee suggested a declaration in support of the UN, Foreign Secretary Lord Home doubted it would be a 'suitable time'.⁴⁶ The fruitless attempts to identify an appropriate topic reinforced how declarations had been devalued, and were little more than a diversionary tactic. There was almost an odd sense

⁴² Patricia McMahon, *Essence of Indecision: Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963* (Montreal, 2009), p. 103

⁴³ Meeting minutes, 22 February 1961, CAB 133/258.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Norman Brook, 'Common market: Handling of the discussions', 21 August 1962, TNA PREM 11/3660.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

of relief amongst officials when the Rhodesian crisis emerged; it provided a meaningful and Commonwealth-specific field in which to provide recommendations. For instance, before the January 1966 Conference, officials 'observed that prime ministers might feel that the situation in Rhodesia provided a unique opportunity for Commonwealth countries to cooperate in initiating a programme of technical assistance with a view to training and giving practical assistance to Africans for senior posts'.⁴⁷ While preparing black Rhodesians for administrative positions after the fall of the Smith regime was a worthy project, calling it a 'unique opportunity' was strangely enthusiastic given that the move had been prompted by UDI.

The pre-Conference attempts to come up with a topic worthy of a declaration also illustrated the extent to which the form of the communiqué was debated before the Conferences even began. Sandys' enthusiasm for a declaration in 1962 was impelled by fears that the communiqué would otherwise be suffused with objections to Britain's EEC plans. Brook suggested that no communiqué be issued in 1962 other than an acknowledgement that Commonwealth governments had explained their views and that the British government would take them into account. Brook told Macmillan that 'This would not be a final communiqué of 'substance' ... but it would provide a reasonably dignified means of winding up the meeting'.⁴⁸ Yet such a tactic would have destroyed the pretence that the 1962 Conference was more than a single-issue gathering. Moreover, there was no hint of multilateralism in the proposal; it almost assumed a reversion to Colonial and early Imperial Conference practice where visiting leaders' views were advisory and subordinate to Britain. Even when Brook tried to muster reasons in favour of a final communiqué, they were less about Commonwealth equality and more about managing expectations. His first argument was simply that communiqués were 'customary', and his second that 'while each prime minister, on leaving London or on arriving home, will put his own gloss

⁴⁷ 'Economic sanctions, cooperation with Zambia and assistance for training Rhodesian Africans - report by officials', 12 January 1966, PRAAD RG 17/2/491.

⁴⁸ Norman Brook to Macmillan, 5 September 1962, TNA PREM 11.3660.

on the results ... a final communiqué does at least provide a single point of departure'.⁴⁹ In Brook's view, the communiqué had gone from a sign of unity to a point of departure. His overriding concern was to avoid a communiqué with 'specific reservations': 'a final communiqué of this kind would set an embarrassing precedent for the future; for the cohesion of the Commonwealth would be prejudiced if it became the practice for minority views to be publicly expressed'.⁵⁰ In practice, the issue was skirted because the majority of countries voiced their disquiet at British entry; their reservations were general rather than specific. Ironically, this meant that the exceptions in the texts could be phrased positively rather than negatively. For instance, the final communiqué noted that 'some independent African countries considered that association ... would not be acceptable to them. On the other hand the Government of Sierra Leone wished to consider further their attitude towards association'.⁵¹ It would have been more accurate to say 'all but one' rather than 'some' African members opposed association, but the depth of opposition made it easier to avoid specifying numbers. As most countries refused to countenance association on any terms, there were fewer conditional clauses in the text than if association had proved more appealing.

The tendency to use ambiguous terms such as 'some' was a corollary of the long-established convention of avoiding ballots at the Conferences. The emphasis on consensus meant that if 'all' could not agree, 'some' was one of the few only alternatives which would not imply a majority vote. In 1965 the Ghanaian delegation sought to break the taboo on specifying numbers and circulated a draft which would have explicated how many countries were in favour of convening a constitutional conference to prepare for majority African rule in Rhodesia:

The communiqué should continue as follows: 'the following proposals were urged upon the British government by [here insert the actual number of Commonwealth heads of government and representatives who endorsed the proposals] ... that in the event of the regime in Salisbury attempting to interfere with the holding of the conference,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ 1962 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 78.

Britain should take such steps as where necessary to see that it was held, including, in the last resort, the revocation of the existing constitution and the establishment of an interim government.⁵²

The Ghanaian campaign derived from Geoffrey Bing's insight into the British government's mindset from his time as a Labour MP. He told Nkrumah that 'the only thing which matters is the final communiqué of the conference. Hitherto the British tactic has been to delay the drafting of this and then to put forward so called compromises'. Bing argued that opponents of the British line should mobilise before the first draft was circulated: 'Likeminded states should early on agree on a formulation of their views and insist on those being included in the communiqué even though this discloses a lack of unanimity'. He was also conscious of the British propensity to drown out contentious passages in the communiqué with numerous affirmations on less divisive issues. His suggestion was to problematise those statements which usually went unchallenged:

since the British Labour government made Commonwealth aid and development one of the points of their election programme, they will no doubt desire to get out of the conference some statement 'welcoming' what they have ... It is suggested that we should use any such attempt to expose the limited amount of aid which they have in fact provided and also to raise the whole question of commodity agreements.⁵³

The Ghanaian plan was largely unsuccessful: on the issue of a constitutional conference, the eventual communiqué stated that 'the British Prime Minister was urged by other Prime Ministers to convene a constitutional conference at an early date, say within three months'.⁵⁴ Instead of enumerating the number of countries in favour, the text quantified a time of three months, although this was softened by the informal term 'say'. Britain seemed to be more willing to accede to requests to specify timelines in communiqués rather than financial commitments or number of countries agreed; perhaps because it was easier to break time commitments on the grounds of availability of leaders and other practical considerations. For instance, the

⁵² Bing to Nkrumah, 8 June 1965, PRAAD RG 17/2/190.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ 1965 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 100.

January 1966 communiqué called for leaders to reconvene in July if the rebellion had not collapsed, but as host Wilson was able to delay the second 1966 Conference to September.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the most infamous of communiqué statements was a time commitment, or at least prediction. The January 1966 communiqué recorded Wilson's conviction that 'on the expert advice available to him the cumulative effects of the economic and financial sanctions might well bring the rebellion to an end within a matter of weeks rather than months'.⁵⁶ In an exemplar of understatement, this was followed by the observation that 'some Prime Ministers had misgivings in this regard'.⁵⁷ They were proven correct, as Rhodesia had to wait another fourteen years for majority rule – with the 'weeks rather than months' claim haunting Wilson for much of that time. The fact that 'weeks rather than months' was so often cited arguably vindicated British efforts to avoid making specific commitments wherever possible; the short-term credibility boost from a content-rich communiqué could be outweighed by providing long-term ammunition for critics when promises were broken. The inclusion of Wilson's woefully misguided claim in the communiqué may have been a by-product of Britain being out of the chairman's seat. Britain could no longer rely on the tactic, identified by Bing, of delaying drafting and only releasing the text to visiting delegations towards the end of the Conference. The initial draft of the January 1966 communiqué was the work of a multinational team of officials, with input from the Commonwealth Secretariat for the first time. While 'weeks rather than months' was the genuine assessment of the CRO at the time, it is hard to imagine that the line would have made it into the final communiqué if it had been drafted in Whitehall. Furthermore, being freed from the chairmanship should have allowed Wilson to be more assertive in prosecuting British interests. When he resumed as chair in London in September 1966, he was forced to add a reference to NIBMAR – no independence before majority African rule – to the

⁵⁵ January 1966 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

communiqué to keep the Conference from breaking apart. In Lagos, however, Wilson did not have the same official responsibility for keeping the Conference on track. Indeed, his reckless prediction about the end of the rebellion was the most ‘un-English’ feature of the January 1966 communiqué which was not otherwise markedly different from those drafted under British hosts. The usual neutral tone was preserved and extensive use of made of precedent; the prime ministers ‘re-affirmed the declaration made in their communiqué of July 1964’ and recalled ‘the principle of one man one vote’ mentioned in the 1965 communiqué.⁵⁸ A technique first used in the 1964 communiqué, that of dividing the text into sections under subheadings, was used again in 1966. Proposals to use more dramatic titles, such as ‘concerted action’, were watered down and the final draft had drier subheadings such as ‘Co-operation with Zambia’.⁵⁹ On the heated topic of whether sanctions should be binding and supported by a UN-endorsed blockade, the situation was coolly rendered in dull, technical language: ‘Some Prime Ministers indicated that they reserved the right if need arises to propose mandatory United Nations action under Articles 41 or 42 of Chapter VII of the Charter. This statement was noted by the other Heads of Government’.⁶⁰ It was testament to the British administrative inheritance that the first communiqué produced in a new location with a new secretariat had so much in common with its predecessors.

The editing of the communiqué had traditionally been the most taxing part of the chairmanship for British prime ministers. When the communiqué was issued on the final afternoon of the 1962 Conference, Macmillan was so fatigued he went to bed at 5 p.m. for a two-hour nap.⁶¹ He had worked overnight with Norman Brook, redrafting the ‘long’ draft, filled with opt-outs, into

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵⁹ New Zealand High Commission, Canberra, to Wellington, 13 January 1966, in ‘Political reporting - Commonwealth – Prime Ministers’ Conference 1960-1966’, ANZ ABHS 22310 W5631/245, PAR 323/3/1.

⁶⁰ January 1966 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 119.

⁶¹ Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986* (London, 1989), p. 356.

a more benign 'short' one.⁶² British prime ministers often recruited from amongst their old Commonwealth colleagues for assistance. Menzies recalled doing 'a lot of "corridor work"' at the 1960 Conference, and wrote to McEwen presenting the communiqué as a joint Anglo-Australian effort: 'Mac and I found ourselves, not for the first time in the past two weeks, using all the tact and persuasion we could muster to get a result'.⁶³ On other occasions, Canada was the conduit. During a stalemate over the communiqué in the September 1966 Conference, Pearson commenced writing his own draft. When Wilson, irate at leakages and caucusing amongst the delegations, threatened to adjourn the Conference for three months, Pearson informed him that he would refuse to attend a rescheduled Conference. Instead, Pearson was put in charge of a nine-man drafting committee which completed its work within a day; when its draft was presented in plenary session it was passed without alterations in just thirty-five minutes.⁶⁴ However there are very few examples of new Commonwealth leaders being called upon to lead communiqué composition, although the move to Singapore in 1971 was in part a recognition of Lee's distinctive voice; under his chairmanship the communiqué was condensed to five pages, in contrast to the prolix twelve page document produced in London in 1969. It is worth speculating whether more engaging communiqués could have been produced if an erudite new Commonwealth leader such as Eric Williams had been given responsibility for drafting, harnessing his initial enthusiasm for the Commonwealth after independence. Instead, the predominant attitude was to view new Commonwealth leaders as potential obstacles rather than a potential resource in creating communiqués. When Sierra Leone's Albert Margai took the floor at the September 1966 plenary session on the communiqué, it was assumed he would be an impediment. As the *Observer* described the scene: 'Wilson glowered at him. But his brief intervention at once cleared up an awkward drafting point. As the delegates went through the draft paragraph by paragraph, it was Margai's booming voice which led the chorus of "agreed"'

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Menzies to McEwen, 15 May 1960, McEwen Papers, NAA M58 3.

⁶⁴ 'The night they saved the Commonwealth', *Observer* (London), 18 September 1966.

and which stamped out any possible pleas for amendment'.⁶⁵ Nonetheless the relationship remained patronising and unequal; Wilson 'beamed gratitude' at Margai, but only after Margai declared 'I am the good boy now'; self-referentially buying into the stereotype of African leaders as either cheerfully obliging or boorishly obstinate.⁶⁶ At times an element of intellectual snobbery could be identified amongst the British delegation. In 1962 Macmillan noted that Heath, 'who is only accustomed to Europeans who are courteous and well informed even if hard bargainers, was astounded at the ignorance, ill-manners and conceit of the Commonwealth'.⁶⁷ It should be stressed however, that this was not necessarily a racialised view, as Macmillan went on to describe Diefenbaker as a 'very crooked man ... so self-centred as to be as sort of caricature of Mr. Gladstone'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it was sometimes old Commonwealth leaders who were the most interruptive. When the Jamaican delegation called for a special reference to developing countries in the passage on commodity agreements in the 1969 communiqué, Holyoake insisted that New Zealand also be recognised as a developing country.⁶⁹ Similarly, when Albert Margai called for increased allocations of aid from developed Commonwealth countries in 1964, Pearson countered that Canada was the largest under-developed country in the world. Ayub Khan interjected: 'oh, don't say that', but Pearson stood by his claim, arguing that, unlike European countries, it still had extensive natural resources which it had to develop.⁷⁰

Guiding communiqués through plenary sessions was a thankless task for the succession of British prime ministers who served as chairman. Debates over the wording of the communiqué at the conclusion of the Conference sometimes operated in a vacuum, forgetting the substantive

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Macmillan diary, 12 September 1962, Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, p. 356.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Meeting, 10 January 1969, in 'Commonwealth affairs – Conferences – Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference 1969 Minutes of Meetings', ANZ ABHS 950 W4627/3702, PM 153/54/4.

⁷⁰ G.D.L. White, Deputy High Commissioner, New Zealand House, to McIntosh, 21 July 1964, in 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting July 1964', ANZ AALR 873 W3158/80, T61/3/37.

discussion which had earlier took place. At the 1969 Conference, Wilson exasperatedly reminded the leaders that, in describing the views of the British government in the communiqué, ‘they would have to stick to the words which he had actually used in the discussion’.⁷¹ On the other hand, as chair Britain retained the ability to apply principles selectively. When Kaunda requested an additional sentence be added to the 1969 communiqué advocating the use of force in Rhodesia, Wilson said that for ‘balance’ this would need to be followed by the phrase ‘the British prime minister explained the reasons why he regarded the use of force as wrong and impracticable’, even though earlier in the session he had refused Gorton’s request that Australia be dissociated by name from the paragraph on the recognition of China by the UN.⁷² In earlier decades the chairman played an even greater role, excising any mention of certain topics in the communiqué, and, more creatively, including topics in communiqués even when they had not been discussed at all in plenary session. For instance, in 1956 Nehru proposed that Commonwealth governments ‘might use their influence’ to seek a resolution to the conflict in Algeria. He made the modest suggestion that ‘A tentative lead might be given by some statement from the present meeting’.⁷³ Eden, however, wanted no intrusion into the French sphere of influence. He stated it was ‘difficult to see what part the Commonwealth governments could usefully play at this juncture’.⁷⁴ His summation of the situation was the epitome of polite understatement: ‘The problem was exceedingly complicated: for example, there was a considerable mixture of population in Algeria’.⁷⁵ Eden’s predecessor had gone to the other extreme; when Menzies called for a discussion on Europe at the 1953 Conference, Churchill stated he ‘would be happy to develop his views on Europe in the later stages of the meeting on the following day; in the meantime a few lines on Europe could be

⁷¹ Fourteenth meeting, 15 January 1969, *ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Third meeting, 29 June 1956, TNA CAB 133/148.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

included in the draft communiqué which was to be prepared that afternoon'.⁷⁶ Thus the Conference's conclusions on Europe were drafted even before the topic was discussed; moreover, the references remained in the final communiqué even though the Conference never got around to covering Europe as an agenda item in plenary session. To declare that 'prime ministers reviewed recent developments in Western Europe' was disingenuous when the only discussion on Europe took place was confined to restricted sessions on defence, which India and Ceylon declined to attend.⁷⁷

Churchill's inclusion of a passage on Europe did not go unchallenged. At the final session of the 1953 Conference, Nehru objected to the sentence in the communiqué which expressed a hope that a European Defence Community would soon be established. He argued, somewhat implausibly, that agreeing to such a statement would compromise India's non-aligned policy.⁷⁸ This highlighted the difficulty of establishing consensus in a single document; if Nehru would not approve what amounted to no more than an expression of a hope, what possibility was there of creating an meaningful text with international impact? The eventual compromise was the embodiment of Commonwealth pusillanimity: the start of the sentence was amended to state that 'Commonwealth countries associated with or interested in the North Atlantic Treaty Association expressed the hope'.⁷⁹ Foss Shanahan wrote to Alister McIntosh with the pointed observation that 'Australia, New Zealand and South Africa would, on any normal construction be held to be excluded. Since these countries would have been willing to subscribe to much stronger statement, the final text may be taken an example to the process by which the whole Commonwealth front is weakened to secure a common front which includes India'.⁸⁰ Yet the process was actually indicative of a wider malaise; as previously noted, no discussion on Europe

⁷⁶ Communiqué meeting, 8 June 1953, TNA CAB 133/135.

⁷⁷ 1953 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 39.

⁷⁸ Meeting, 9 June 1953, TNA CAB 133/135.

⁷⁹ 1953 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 39.

⁸⁰ Shanahan to Macintosh, 2 July 1953, ANZ ACIE 8798 EAW2619/132, PM 153/35/5.

had actually occurred in plenary session and the paragraph was only being included in the communiqué because Mohammed Ali argued the text would ‘lack balance’ if it made no reference to Europe, given that it already included a paragraph on the ‘problems of the Middle East’.⁸¹ The whole episode demonstrated the circular reasoning the communiqué created – areas which were not even raised in plenary sessions were inserted into it to create a rounded text, while other fields which had been the subject of detailed discussions and briefings could only be alluded to. Communiqués thus compromised the oft-lauded ‘informality’ of the Conferences, and remoulded their structure. The number of restricted sessions on defence rose, especially during the second Churchill premiership, because it was argued that such meetings were ‘not strictly a part of the meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers’ and so did not have to feature in the communiqué.⁸² The illogicality of having meetings which were not part of the meeting was advantageous inasmuch as it allowed the host country to meet with delegations selectively. Yet it meant that an increasing proportion of discussions could not be included in the communiqué. The 1955 Conference included at least four restricted sessions, but the CRO noted that the Indian delegation ‘contended that the additional meetings were not part of the conference and when the time came to prepare the final communiqué at the end of the conference they insisted that it should contain no reference to these defence discussions’.⁸³ Instead, an additional communiqué was issued under the title ‘regional defence discussions’ in which the Indian delegation ‘played no part’.⁸⁴ The issuance of additional communiqués was not a sustainable solution – if used regularly it would have given the appearance of a two-tier Commonwealth – and the excising of defence into ‘informal’ side meetings made the plenary sessions more platitudinous. The hardening of divisions between informal and formal meetings,

⁸¹ Meeting, 9 June 1953, TNA CAB 133/135.

⁸² Defence minutes, ‘Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting - June 1953 - Vol. 5 - Secret’, LAC MG26-L, volume 85, file C-10-21.

⁸³ Brown to Snelling, 24 May 1956, TNA DO/5172.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

inspired by a need to simplify the drafting of communiqués, closed off any possibility of India or Ceylon contributing to defence policy discussions after 1951.

Another by-product of the emphasis on obtaining a unanimous communiqué was that it could be used by delegations as a tactical threat. Especially over Rhodesia, leaders tried to goad each other into recording outright dissent. In 1964, Menzies declared that ‘if other prime ministers insisted upon embodying their voices in the conference communiqué, I would waive the old rule of unanimity provided only that their views were stated to be the views of some prime ministers, but not stated to be the views of all’.⁸⁵ He claimed that ‘I at once came under attack by several of the African leaders ... “then you do not want a conference; you want political prisoners kept in gaol” ... another, offered the suggestion that the communiqué should say, at the appropriate point, “Menzies of Australia dissents”’. In retaliation Menzies asked: ‘In Australia we did not put our opposition into prison. Could my critics, particularly Nkrumah, say the same? Second, I said the threat to mention my name was a form of blackmail to which I had no disposition to yield’.⁸⁶ Menzies claimed privately that such confrontations with new Commonwealth leaders were signs that while ‘every prime minister spoke English with complete ease’, they did not all share ‘the same habits of reason and understanding’.⁸⁷ On the other hand, the tactic of trying to provoke delegates into recording their objections was quite parliamentary in character – it was not dissimilar to seeking to get opponents ‘named’ by the Speaker for poor behaviour, or asking aggravating questions until an opponent made a blunder which would be recorded in *Hansard*. Afro-Asian tactics on Rhodesia were adversarial, but this could be seen as part of the British political inheritance rather than a sign that old and new Commonwealth leaders lacked common understanding. It was not as though the Afro-Asian ‘bloc’ was belligerently anti-British, given that their preferred model for interim post-rebellion

⁸⁵ Rhodesia note for file, Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 15, folder 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

governance in Rhodesia was a period of direct rule under a British Governor before majority black rule, rather than a power-sharing agreement between white and black Rhodesians. The delegations which were most allergic to a period of direct rule in Rhodesia were white: McIntosh gave a talk to the New Zealand Department of External Affairs complaining that 'since Rhodesia had never been ruled directly by Britain, the first of these demands was virtually impossible and it seems that at best there could be an interim government by Rhodesians of a more liberal outlook'.⁸⁸ Maltese Prime Minister Giorgio Borg Oliver declared that 'having been under direct rule and having fought against it, he could not now be associated with recommending it be imposed on others'.⁸⁹ Not only did he insist on a notation in the minutes of the January 1966 Conference expressing dissent, he requested that the Secretary-General publish the objection publicly.⁹⁰ This was an unprecedented move, although a quickly forgotten one; the weight of the custom that communiqués did not identify dissenting countries was so great that when the Thatcher government disassociated itself from some passages on apartheid it was reported as being a first. Stephen Chan wrote in 1986 that 'a precedent has been set' by Thatcher, although he argued that it could be a beneficial one: 'the Commonwealth may, in the future, behave like other international organizations without the constant fear of disintegration whenever consensus is lost or difficult'.⁹¹ The notion of a consensual communiqué was so entrenched that until the 1980s there was a residual fear that the inclusion of dissenting voices would lead to a formal schism in the Commonwealth.

The alternative to enumerating countries who disagreed with the majority view was to fall back on the helpfully ambiguous word, 'some'. This nonetheless undermined the flow of the text;

⁸⁸ Talk given by Mr. McIntosh to diplomatic officers of the Department of External Affairs on the recently concluded Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting, 21 September 1966, ANZ ABHS 20358 W5400/85, KL 90/3/2.

⁸⁹ Sixth meeting, 12 January 1966, PRAAD RG/17/2/491.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Stephen Chan, *Twelve Years of Commonwealth Diplomatic History: Commonwealth Summit Meetings 1979-1991* (Lewiston, 1992), p. 52.

McIntosh observed that a ‘peculiar feature’ of the September 1966 communiqué was its ‘two-part or antiphonal character reflecting both minority and majority opinion. This unfortunately left New Zealand with Britain in a minority group with an implied racist attitude’.⁹² McIntosh told his department that Wilson ‘was upset by this development’.⁹³ Yet British officials were comfortable with such a dichotomous text, deducing that the press and officials elsewhere would read between the lines in any case. Joe Garner called the portion of the 1965 communiqué on the Commonwealth Secretariat the first of ‘those splendidly antiphonal documents which became a feature of Commonwealth communiqués’.⁹⁴ Garner was right to point to the internal tensions inherent in the text. One passage read: ‘the secretariat should not arrogate to itself executive functions. At the same time it shall have, and develop, a relationship with other intra-Commonwealth bodies. The secretariat should have a constructive role to play. At the same time it should operate initially on a modest footing’.⁹⁵ The seemingly contradictory instructions were an inevitable consequence of trying to placate all parties. Similarly, the length of communiqués grew exponentially in the 1960s, with each delegation adamant that a paragraph on their pet regional issue be included. Meanwhile, the potency of the language declined. For example, the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation between 1963 and 1966 was an obvious Commonwealth concern, and in some respects was the last Commonwealth war: Australia, New Zealand and Britain committed troops to assist Malaysian forces, and Canada provided military aid. Yet this successful example of cooperation went unremarked upon in the communiqués. Many new Commonwealth leaders were reluctant to side openly with Malaysia over Indonesia, a major influence in the non-aligned movement, even though India had expressed its moral support for Malaysia.⁹⁶ The Tunku was bitterly disappointed when the prime ministers declined

⁹² ‘Talk given by Mr. McIntosh to diplomatic officers of the Department of External Affairs on the recently concluded Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting, 21 September 1966, ANZ ABHS 20358 W5400/85, KL 90/3/2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), p. 352.

⁹⁵ Agreed Memorandum on the Commonwealth Secretariat, in W. David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth 1965-90* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 50-51.

⁹⁶ ‘Commonwealth Backing for Malaysia’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 1964, p. 2.

to provide anything more than ‘their sympathy and support’ to the Malaysian cause in the 1964 communiqué, and even this acknowledgment was awkwardly shoehorned into a paragraph on disarmament.⁹⁷ In 1965 the Malaysian issue got its own subheading and an early position in the communiqué before Cyprus and Rhodesia, but these were arguably gestures to compensate for a lack of content; the expression ‘sympathy and support’ was quoted verbatim from the previous year’s communiqué. The only addition was to state that the prime ministers ‘looked forward to the establishment of peaceful, friendly and mutually advantageous relations between Malaysia and Indonesia on a just and honourable basis’; a statement which sounded oddly like a call for a negotiated settlement despite the conspicuous military success of Commonwealth forces in deterring Indonesian incursions: Denis Healey described the campaign as ‘one of the most efficient uses of military forces in the history of the world’.⁹⁸ The weak support lent to Malaysia by much of the new Commonwealth during the Confrontation may help explain why, upon Britain’s withdrawal ‘east of Suez’ in 1971, the defence commitments of Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore in the region were formalised in the Five Power Defence Arrangements. It was an acknowledgment that Commonwealth membership was no longer sufficient to ensure support in armed conflict; what had once been assumed of all members now needed to be explicated in an ‘exchange of notes’ and restricted to those members who chose to opt in.⁹⁹

The Five Power Agreements, signed in the year of the first CHOGM in Singapore, were emblematic of the move away from the ‘non-diplomacy’ of the early Commonwealth towards a more structured, yet shallower, relationship between members. At face value, the communiqués of the late 1960s were replete with new initiatives: a Commonwealth Foundation

⁹⁷ 1964 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 84.

⁹⁸ 1965 communiqué, *ibid.*, p. 96; John Pimlott, (ed.), *British Military Operations 1945-1985* (London, 1984), p. 99.

⁹⁹ ‘Five Power Defence Arrangements: Exchange of Notes’, 1 December 1971, *Australian Treaty Series* (Canberra, 1996), no. 21.

to promote professional exchanges, a Technical Co-operation Programme and a Commonwealth Information Programme. Yet in many of these cases, the only commitment was ‘in principle’ support for the idea, and a referral to the Secretariat for further study. Even the most trivial of projects was referred. The proposal for a Commonwealth Book Development Programme in 1969 was a worthy one, but it was far removed in ambition from debates at early Conferences about the formation of the UN or the latest summit meeting with Stalin. Even the glorified book-token scheme required ‘expert working parties’ to conduct ‘studies in detail’ before approval.¹⁰⁰ The prime ministers even saw fit to remind the Secretary-General to consider the ‘implications of the ratification of the Protocol to the Berne Copyright Convention’ – in laymen’s terms, to check how copyright affected the production of subsidised textbooks for developing countries.¹⁰¹ The frequent lapses into jargon were particularly grating given that many prime ministers lauded the Conferences for their the use of plain English in contrast to the bureaucratic multilingualism of the UN – luckily the 1969 communiqué also gave in-principle support to the creation of ‘regional centres for the teaching of English’.¹⁰² The flurry of activity was designed to disguise the lack of meaningful agreement – officials even resorted to inserting passages about other Commonwealth organisations to bulk up the communiqué. For instance, the September 1966 communiqué dedicated a whole subheading to the Commonwealth Medical Conference, noting that ‘heads of government were happy to accept’ Obote’s offer to host the Conference in Kampala in 1968.¹⁰³ While this may have been a generous display of Ugandan hospitality, it was wholly irrelevant to the Prime Ministers’ Conferences. Commonwealth Medical Conferences were administered by the Commonwealth Secretariat and were not attended by prime ministers. There was no need, therefore, for prime ministers to assent to Obote’s invitation other than a desire to add an extra paragraph to the

¹⁰⁰ 1969 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 148.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ September 1966 communiqué, *ibid.*, p. 132.

communiqué. Conversely, on issues where high-level Commonwealth consultation was still vital, the communiqué was remarkably vague. Considering that sterling was still widely used as a reserve currency, there were very few economic initiatives in the communiqués, and those which were included were often simplistic. For example, the 1965 communiqué stated that ‘the Prime Ministers agreed on the desirability of exploring means by which Commonwealth trade might be encouraged and expanded. One possibility would be to enable Commonwealth Governments, in planning their economic development, to take into account each others’ plans. An exchange of information of this kind might enable production to be more effectively matched to requirements’.¹⁰⁴ It is astonishing that even this self-evident suggestion to exchange information, without any regulatory or budgetary obligations, was still only described as a ‘possibility’.

The lengthy stretches of uncontroversial platitudes in the communiqués were in themselves evidence of a venerable tradition in British governance: keeping leaders occupied with minutiae and jargon, allowing civil servants to carry on their work undisturbed. Nor was prosaic nature of the communiqués necessarily a sign of obfuscation or disagreement. The dry and unemotional prose closely reflected the language used in the minutes. For instance, a 1948 plenary session on closer Commonwealth consultation stated that ‘after discussion’ – code for a major quarrel – ‘it was agreed to consider the statement on the basis of a recommendation to Commonwealth governments and not as a document for publication’.¹⁰⁵ When the minutes – classified Top Secret – were so discreet, it was logical that a public document such as the communiqué was even more circumspect. Substitutes for the communiqué were frequently mooted, but the weight of custom, extending back into the Imperial Conferences, made communiqués difficult to dispense with. When Brook sounded out Canadian High

¹⁰⁴ 1965 communiqué, *ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ Thirteenth meeting, 21 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

Commissioner George Drew about the possibility of foregoing a communiqué at the 1962 Conference, he stressed that an agreement not to publish a communiqué would have to be made public well before the beginning of the Conference.¹⁰⁶ Yet no matter how much warning was given, the absence of a communiqué would have been interpreted as a sign of irreconcilable differences. Britain nonetheless continued to look for an alternative; the day before the 1962 Conference commenced, it was pushing for a daily communiqué to be published in lieu of a final communiqué.¹⁰⁷ John Bunting, Secretary of the Australian Department of External Affairs, recorded that ‘all this, however, will be for the Prime Ministers’ Conference to discuss tomorrow’ which effectively settled the issue; by leaving the decision for the prime ministers, officials made it more likely that the status quo would be preserved.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in September 1966, Secretary-General Arnold Smith lobbied for the issue of an interim communiqué after the Rhodesia debate, so that the topic did not dominate the final communiqué. Pearson said he was ‘rather taken with the idea’, but deemed it ‘unrealistic’ as ‘several of the African delegates ... would certainly want to continue the battle to the last’.¹⁰⁹ Even when couched in bureaucratic language, the communiqué remained an important political weapon.

Therefore, while critiquing the communiqué became as much of a Commonwealth ritual as its issuance, its centrality to the Conferences continued. Menzies argued against producing a final communiqué for over a decade, but was often a lone voice. At Menzies’ behest, in 1960 Macmillan consulted each serving Commonwealth prime minister who had previously attended a Conference and found that all except Menzies were in favour of communiqué, adding that ‘I myself, though I would have liked to be able to dispense with it, have come reluctantly to the

¹⁰⁶ George Drew to Department of External Affairs, 24 July 1962, ‘Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - 1962 - Working File’, LAC MG31-E83, volume 6, file 5, R3969-626-5-E.

¹⁰⁷ Bunting to Menzies, 9 September 1962, McEwen Papers, NAA M58 67.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Notes of a meeting between Wilson and Pearson, 4 September 1966, TNA PREM 13/782.

conclusion that it is inevitable'.¹¹⁰ This indubitably gave an air of cliché to the text; in a 1956 interview for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, Menzies observed that 'People say the communiqué is a collection of clichés', but conceded that 'in this world clichés are frequently the only thing all people agree on'. His professed alternative was that 'some future conference limit itself to some single question or group of questions, related questions, and see whether we couldn't produce a statement of Commonwealth opinion ... we should try to organise our ideas and work to the point of offering constructive views on world affairs ... In that sense the Commonwealth would continue to be a third force in the world'.¹¹¹ Lip service was paid to Menzies' suggestion in the 1961 communiqué, which opened by declaring 'on this occasion the Prime Ministers would concentrate their main attention on a limited number of specific problems'.¹¹² Yet the limited number of topics covered in 1961 had less to do with newfound discipline and more to do with dedicating days to debating South African membership. Moreover, when a single-issue Conference was finally convened in Lagos regarding Rhodesia, Menzies boycotted it. This suggests that Menzies' espousal of single-issue communiqués was primarily about avoiding the airing of internal dissent in order to preserve the fading fiction of the Commonwealth as the 'third force' in global affairs. It also begs the question of who was the intended audience of the communiqués. As the last chapter argued, the impression the Conferences made upon the British public largely came from the presence of visiting leaders in London rather than the actual outcome of their discussions. Communiqués may have been useful for long-distance distribution, but even in the antipodes journalists preferred to work from the national press conferences given in London or otherwise interrogate their prime minister on his return. Upon disembarkation in Fremantle after sailing home from the 1953 Conference, Menzies was asked if the Conference discussed Princess Margaret's potential marriage to a divorcée, to which he replied 'if the conference had been asked to discuss all the

¹¹⁰ Macmillan to Menzies, 10 March 1960, in TNA CO 1032/362.

¹¹¹ *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 26 July 1956, TNA DO 35/5171.

¹¹² 1961 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 68.

rumours circulated about Princess Margaret it would not have had time for any other business'.¹¹³ It was unlikely that Princess Margaret's personal life was the sort of single-issue Conference Menzies had in mind. The tendency of the press to base their reportage on briefings and interviews rather than the communiqué inspired one of the more intriguing suggestions for an alternative. In 1950, Pearson, whilst Canadian External Affairs Secretary, argued that 'the drafting of these communiqués has in the past caused more trouble than the resulting document was worth' and instead proposed that 'in its place there be substituted a final public meeting of the conference at which each prime minister would have an opportunity to make a public statement on what he considered to be the accomplishments of the conference'.¹¹⁴ The prospect of prime ministers sitting as a panel and making closing statements to the press would have certainly been more compelling than the publication of the communiqué.

As the communiqués were not intrinsic to public perceptions of the Conferences, it is debatable as to who the communiqués were written for. The early communiqués and declarations had undertones of being written for the monarch. The signatories of the 1944 declaration described themselves in the opening line as 'The King's Prime Ministers'.¹¹⁵ In 1949, a Dominions Office memorandum for Attlee suggested that 'In a sense the conclusion of this meeting will take the shape of advice to be tendered to the King collectively by the prime ministers of the Commonwealth'. As it was deemed 'somewhat doubtful whether, at least at the present stage, there is any constitutional place for collective advice', it was considered 'more accurate and practical to regard this as a case in which the prime ministers tender advice severally but unanimously', hence the need for an agreed text.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the relationship between prime ministers and monarch was intimate enough that decisions could be conveyed verbally;

¹¹³ 'Coronation Trip 1953', Menzies Papers, NLA MS 4936, series 8, box 339, folder 1.

¹¹⁴ Pearson to Norman Robertson, 30 December 1955, 'Conferences - Commonwealth Prime Ministers - Vol. 1 - Personal & Confidential', LAC MG26-L, volume 170, file C-18-11.

¹¹⁵ 1944 declaration, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ Memo for prime minister', 26 April 1949, TNA DO 35/2209.

in addition to the declaration, a ‘small meeting’ was arranged at Buckingham Palace for the final evening of the 1949 Conference.¹¹⁷ Even as the number of leaders grew, the Head of the Commonwealth continued to be ranked first for the distribution of briefs: the Queen always received a special leather-bound and embossed copy of the minutes.¹¹⁸ With such privileged access, it cannot be said that communiqués were necessary to convey the deliberations of the Commonwealth leaders to their ceremonial head. The most logical audience for the communiqué was the press, as they were denied access to the minutes. Yet as already mentioned, their reports centred on public appearances and private briefings, although many ‘newspapers of record’ continued to publish communiqué in full. Overall, the communiqué was little more than a rhetorical device for journalists, who contrasted the tame text with the vivid backstage bickering. For instance, the *Ottawa Journal* wrote at the end of the 1962 Conference that ‘both sides of the communiqué gave out with the old con – the ten days of talks had been all buddy buddy. This was eyewash. Blood had been spilled’.¹¹⁹ The *Toronto Globe and Mail* drew a similar conclusion: ‘Despite the genial communiqué on Wednesday and benign comments on it by various prime ministers, it must be obvious to everyone that the past ten days at Marlborough House have done the Commonwealth no good at all’.¹²⁰ As most major Commonwealth newspapers downplayed the significance of the communiqués and provided their own analysis, it was possible that an important target audience for the communiqués was countries outside the Commonwealth. Hints of this intention have already been seen in Attlee’s call for ‘platitudes’ which ‘would not necessarily appear so to the rest of the world’ and Menzies aspirations for a communiqué which would appear to represent a ‘third force in the world’. There appeared to

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ ‘Distribution of annex to Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference - second meeting’, TNA PREM 13/1797.

¹¹⁹ *Ottawa Journal*, 20 September 1962, in Andrea Benvenuti and Stuart Ward, ‘Britain, Europe and the “other quiet revolution” in Canada’, in Buckner (ed.), *Canada and the End of Empire* (Vancouver, 2005), p. 179.

¹²⁰ *Globe and Mail*, 20 September 1962, *ibid.*

be a belief that clichés which failed to fool Commonwealth citizens might still work on foreigners.

Several elements of the communiqués were geared towards highlighting the Commonwealth's self-proclaimed status as an important international grouping. The opening paragraphs of every communiqué from 1957 onwards recorded the rapid growth of the Commonwealth. Interestingly, the terms used to describe each nation's debut varied; most were 'welcomed', others were 'authorised', but Cyprus was 'accepted'.¹²¹ Whenever a country applied for continued membership as a republic, a point was made to 'recognise' their continued membership, to reaffirm the principle, after South Africa's departure, that approval of such an application was not automatic.¹²² All of these procedural passages emphasised that the Commonwealth was an expanding organisation, rather than a static ex-imperial club. The 1969 communiqué reminded readers that the Conference was 'one of the biggest consultative gatherings of Heads of Government from all parts of the world since the signature of the United Nations charter' which sounded impressive even if the phrase 'consultative gathering' – presumably inserted to appease the ghost of Mackenzie King – lessened the rhetorical impact.¹²³ References to the scale of the Conferences were also a pre-emptive defence against accusations that the communiqué was meaningless – securing any degree of consensus among such a large body of leaders could be presented to the world as an achievement. Wilson's foreign affairs private secretary Arthur Michael Palliser attempted to impress no less a figure than Henry Kissinger by claiming in 1969 that 'when we came to draft the communiqué there was not one member of the conference who wanted to play down or excuse the behaviour of the USSR'. He confided in Kissinger that:

It was Dawda Jawara of The Gambia, with support from several other leaders of small African countries, who insisted that our communiqué should say what had to be said

¹²¹ Ball, *The 'Open' Commonwealth*, p. 22.

¹²² 1965 communiqué, *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²³ Andrestinos N. Papadopoulos, *Multilateral Diplomacy within the Commonwealth* (The Hague, 1982), p. 45.

about the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. This was without prompting from us and it made a much greater impression on the conference than if only one or another 'Western' member had been pressing for agreement on the text.¹²⁴

Palliser argued that newer members, suffering 'disenchantment' after their initial experience of UN and Non-Aligned Movement meetings, were now turning 'almost with relief to the Commonwealth association as a group representing every continent yet in which all speak a common language'.¹²⁵ With the exception of the communiqué of the Lagos Conference on UDI in January 1966, the communiqués never gave up their pretensions to a 'world role'. The opening procedural statements were always followed by a number of paragraphs on the 'major international questions of the day', paralleling the 'general review of the world situation' which customarily took first place on the Conference agenda.¹²⁶ As it was not at all essential that the communiqué follow the order of the agenda, the pre-eminence accorded to foreign affairs in the communiqué was another indicator that the Commonwealth wished to appear on the world stage as an independent voice rather than being entirely consumed by internal disputes.

Thus the language of the communiqué had to strike a difficult balance; paying homage to the much-vaunted informality of the Conferences, including the absence of ballots, while still presenting the Commonwealth as capable of collective action. The Conferences had no legislative power, but this did not preclude claims that the communiqués were at least morally binding given that they were a public record of agreement between national heads of government. Nehru pugnaciously made the case in the Indian Consistent Assembly that the 1949 declaration had a treaty-like status: 'I am surprised to see that some Hon. members have sent in notices of amendments ... it cannot be amended in this house or in any house. It can be accepted or rejected. The fact of agreement – unanimous or otherwise – is recorded in the

¹²⁴ Palliser to Kissinger, 24 January 1969, TNA CAB 164/413.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ 1957 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 55.

final communiqué at the end of the meeting'.¹²⁷ In Nehru's view, it was 'possible to reach and implement accords in this way because the national representatives are heads of government in a position to take whatever action may be necessary to that end'.¹²⁸ This interpretation relied heavily on the personal authority of each prime minister; the legitimacy of the text could be questioned if leaders sent deputies. This is what occurred at the first Conference after Nehru's death, when, owing to Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's illness, Finance Minister T.T. Krishnamachari represented India.¹²⁹ Krishnamachari stridently opposed Ayub's push for the inscription of Kashmir on the agenda. The Indian line was backed by chairman Douglas-Home, but as a compromise an allusion towards Kashmir was made in the communiqué: 'The Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction the public statements by the President of Pakistan and the Prime Minister of India and expressed their hope that the problems between their countries will be solved in the same friendly spirit'.¹³⁰ The phrasing was an exemplar of evasiveness – it did not even mention Kashmir and referred only to existing public statements, insinuating that no discussion took place at the Conference either in plenary session or sideline meetings. Nevertheless, the single sentence 'was widely resented in India' and outrage only subsided after Krishnamachari's return to India, where he clarified that the reference was included with his consent.¹³¹ The episode highlighted the additional scrutiny the communiqué could receive domestically when a deputy was sent in place of a prime minister. A gathering composed exclusively of national leaders was always likely to be cautious in its use of language, to avoid infringing on each other's freedom of action; whereas other ministers had less to lose as they could be overruled later by their leader. In September 1961, the annual meeting of Commonwealth Finance Ministers was held in Accra. Instead of keeping its usual low profile,

¹²⁷ Cyriac Maprayil, *Nehru and the Commonwealth* (New Delhi, 1976), p. 49.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ S.C. Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth* (Agra, 1970), p. 45.

¹³⁰ 1964 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 84.

¹³¹ Gangal, *India and the Commonwealth*, p. 46.

the meeting produced an arresting communiqué regarding the common market.¹³² It declared that ‘all other Commonwealth representatives expressed grave apprehension and concern regarding the possible results of the initiative taken by the United Kingdom’; ‘most Commonwealth countries questioned whether the United Kingdom ... could possibly secure in the proposed negotiations an agreement which would protect Commonwealth interests’.¹³³ The communiqué caused alarm in Whitehall, prompting the many attempts by Brook and other British officials to do away with a final communiqué at the 1962 Conference; it was feared that if a similarly strongly worded document was published in London by prime ministers rather than in Accra by finance ministers, it would restrict Britain’s hand in future negotiations in Brussels. Richard Lamb’s biography of Macmillan notes that there was considerable relief amongst the British delegation when the eventual 1962 communiqué involved no ‘promises beyond that of bearing in mind Commonwealth fears’.¹³⁴

Such incidents illustrate that it was commonly felt that an agreed communiqué, signed by prime ministers rather than deputies, had at least some moral force. It was difficult to decide, however, if this was anything more meaningful than a ‘promise’ similar to that of an election manifesto. Commonwealth scholars were divided on whether a single communiqué could represent a definitive Commonwealth statement on an issue. After South African withdrawal, J.D.B. Miller still maintained that ‘there is still no Commonwealth “policy” on the race question’ because the 1961 communiqué ‘made no official statements about racialism’.¹³⁵ M.S. Rajan retorted that Miller took ‘too legalistic a view’ and pointed to the 1960 communiqué, which ‘emphasised that the Commonwealth itself is a multiracial association and expressed the need to ensure good relations between all member states and peoples’.¹³⁶ Rajan could also be accused of being too

¹³² Benvenuti and Ward, ‘Britain, Europe and the “other quiet revolution”’, p. 171.

¹³³ J.D.B. Miller, *Britain and the Old Dominions* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 262.

¹³⁴ Richard Lamb, *The Macmillan Years 1957-1963: The Emerging Truth* (London, 1995), p. 178.

¹³⁵ J.D.B. Miller, ‘South Africa’s departure’, in *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, 1:1 (1961), p. 69.

¹³⁶ M.S. Rajan, *The post-war Transformation of the Commonwealth* (London, 1963), p. 57.

legalistic, as the act of South African withdrawal in 1961 was undoubtedly more influential in establishing a precedent than the noble words of the 1960 communiqué. Nonetheless, as the Commonwealth became less familial and more institutional, it was increasingly possible to interpret the communiqué as having a legal status. In 1968, future Trinidadian cabinet minister Cuthbert Joseph wrote that ‘There is now growing opinion that the communiqué of the Commonwealth Prime Minister’s Conference imports, in some respects, the status of a valid international agreement’.¹³⁷ He cited paragraph ten of the September 1966 communiqué which contained a British undertaking to sponsor a resolution in the Security Council ‘providing for effective and selective mandatory economic sanctions’ against Rhodesia if the regime had not fallen by the end of the year, so long as the resolution was ‘given the full support of Commonwealth representatives at the United Nations’.¹³⁸ By mid-December, British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart was asserting that not all Commonwealth representatives were upholding their side of the bargain and supporting the draft resolution at the UN.¹³⁹ The situation was described thusly by the *Times*: ‘Britain and the Commonwealth may disagree in the Security Council about how tough the resolutions would be; this would give Britain the right, by virtue of the Commonwealth communiqué, to call off mandatory sanctions altogether’.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, the September communiqué also stated that if Rhodesia did not make ‘initial and indispensable steps’ towards ending the rebellion, the British government would ‘withdraw all previous proposals for a constitutional settlement’, and, most importantly would ‘not thereafter be prepared to submit to the British Parliament any settlement which involves independence before majority rule’.¹⁴¹ In December 1966, Wilson and Ian Smith met on board HMS *Tiger* but failed to reach a settlement. In the Commons on 20 December, Wilson declared that this meant the *Tiger* proposals were withdrawn and that his government would proceed with the policy as

¹³⁷ Cuthbert Joseph, *Diplomatic Protection and Nationality: The Commonwealth of Nations* (Gateshead, 1968), p. 68.

¹³⁸ September 1966 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 126.

¹³⁹ Joseph, *Diplomatic Protection and Nationality*, p. 68.

¹⁴⁰ *Times*, 17 December 1966, in *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ September 1966 communiqué, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, pp. 125-6.

‘set out in paragraph ten of the communiqué which was issued at the end of the meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers in September and endorsed by a clear majority vote in this House ... the position now is that we have carried out what the House endorsed – our obligations to the Commonwealth’.¹⁴² Joseph extrapolated from these example to argue: ‘This type of legal reasoning applied to the communiqué ... suggests that such an *inter se* understanding, while not concluded and processed as a formal treaty, is nevertheless relied upon by some member states as to be of more than merely formal significance’. Moreover, he hypothesised that ‘the endorsement initially given by the Commons to the declarations contained in the communiqué was tantamount in its effect to the ratification of a treaty’.¹⁴³ However, Joseph’s theory was undercut by talks between Wilson and Smith on HMS *Fearless* in October 1968; most new Commonwealth countries agreed that the terms Wilson offered at the talks were in contravention of Britain’s 1966 commitment.

Therefore, the argument that communiqués had a treaty-like status was not reflected in practice. This should not overshadow the fact that their very composition impacted outcomes. The need to find an appropriate form of words for the communiqué was one of the most intractable elements of the debate over South African membership. Hyam argued that ‘if Verwoerd had accepted the right of other members to record their detestation of apartheid and their commitment to non-discrimination as basic to the multi-racial Commonwealth – even if he could not subscribe to it himself – South Africa’s membership could probably have been continued’.¹⁴⁴ The difficulty of drafting a communiqué did not necessarily increase year on year, in line with the expansion of membership. If the communiqués had simply been a précis of proceedings, the challenge would have indeed grown steadily: Wilson informed delegates at the

¹⁴² Wilson, House of Commons debates, 20 December 1966, in Joseph, *Diplomatic Protection and Nationality*, p. 69.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 322.

final plenary session in 1969 that eighty-eight speeches were given on the four major topics.¹⁴⁵ However, as this chapter as shown, entire fields were omitted from the communiqués on the grounds they had been confined to ‘restricted’ sessions, while other topics were included even when they had not been discussed at all. The communiqués were always about presenting for public consumption an idealised, harmonious Commonwealth which never existed. The search for tangible, saleable commitments was not an innovation of the 1960s. At the 1948 Conference St Laurent complained about the paragraph heralding enhancements in ‘methods of consultation’ between Commonwealth government, arguing it would ‘be misleading to announce them as though they were new developments agree on at the meeting, for example, it would be wrong to imply that the Canadian High Commissioner in London had not in the past had direct access to the Foreign Secretary’.¹⁴⁶ St Laurent was naïve to think that the communiqué could not or should not have repackaged existing mechanisms and presented them as new; delegates had to utilise every ploy they could muster, as the entire concept of a final communiqué with agreed decisions was rather a paradox for a body which prided itself on its voluntary nature. The dogma that the Commonwealth operated by convention rather than charter lent an element of irony to any text which tried to prescribe a specific outcome; for instance, the memorandum on the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat which formed part of the 1965 communiqué stated that any initiatives regarding Commonwealth consultation must be ‘Conscious of the importance of maintaining the unwritten conventions which have always determined those processes. The Secretary-General will observe the same conventions and act in the same spirit’.¹⁴⁷ The leaders thus tried to entrench informality by formalising in writing the observance of unwritten conventions.

¹⁴⁵ Fourteenth meeting, 15 January 1969, ANZ ABHS 950 W4627/3702, PM 153/54/4.

¹⁴⁶ Twelfth meeting, 20 October 1948, TNA CAB 133/88.

¹⁴⁷ Agreed Memorandum on the Commonwealth Secretariat, in Papadopoulos, *Multilateral Diplomacy within the Commonwealth*, p. 143.

The authorial voice of the communiqué had a reassuring continuity, with officialese disguising changes in both political and official personnel. Yet each communiqué was also an amalgam of the personalities of the participants. This chapter has demonstrated that prime ministers took the drafting and editing of the communiqué to be a personal responsibility. For instance, St Laurent's copy of the 1951 draft proposed by Menzies contains a number of hand-written edits. After the opening phrase, 'Our historic Commonwealth', Menzies' descriptor 'of which His Majesty the King is the Head' was struck through and replaced by 'which comprises one-fourth of the world's population'. St Laurent's less-monarchical version prevailed.¹⁴⁸ Menzies' start to the concluding paragraph, 'we say these things with a full heart and a single mind' was also truncated by the Canadians to omit the 'single mind'.¹⁴⁹ It was commonplace in the opening paragraph to specify which countries had sent prime ministers and which had sent deputies; either way it was implied that the text which followed had the imprimatur of each country's head of delegation. Only in 1946 was more than one delegate mentioned for one country; Evatt, who deputised for Chifley in the latter part of the Conference, wilyly proposed an amendment at the final plenary session to ensure he was mentioned by name in the communiqué.¹⁵⁰ Listing leaders did not ensure an uncritical reading; on the contrary it tended to give the communiqués a self-congratulatory feel. Proclamations that methods of Commonwealth consultation 'have proved their worth' did little to dispel accusations that the grouping was a complacent club; Don Taylor observed that as early as 1948 the Conferences were setting new standards for 'woolly communiqués', being mocked by one delegate as 'mothers' meetings'.¹⁵¹ Yet twenty years later communiqués were still being produced, only with an additional twenty 'mothers'. If the communiqués were a running joke, why were they produced in an unbroken run which continues into present-day CHOGMs? The explanation is that they gave a purpose of the

¹⁴⁸ Brook to St Laurent, 12 January 1951, 'External Affairs: Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1951', LAC MG26-L, volume 234.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ 'Draft communiqué indicating amendments proposed by Dr Evatt', 23 May 1946, TNA CAB 133/86.

¹⁵¹ Don Taylor, *The Years of Challenge: The Commonwealth and the British Empire, 1945-1958* (London, 1959), p. 87.

Conferences, enabling a delicate negotiation process to take place. Visiting leaders could take the text home, certain it would be phrased broadly enough to provide some evidence of success: a subheading or clause which seemed to hold the former imperial power to account, or provided assurance of support against regional rivals. For the host nation, so long as the communiqué remained couched in reserved, ambiguous English, it provided a useful device to accumulate a large number of signatories to its policy of the day. In 1966 Miller contended that 'If one looks at communiqués from 1937 on, it is clear that the main result of these meetings has been to reinforce whatever broad lines, political and economic, Britain has been pursuing in the world at large'.¹⁵² Even on the most divisive issues of the EEC and Rhodesia, Britain secured a text which did not unduly inhibit its freedom of diplomatic movement. Indeed, by avoiding the diplomatic language of resolutions and treaties in favour of the platitudes on consultation and consensus, the Commonwealth enabled itself to carry on expanding even as commonality declined.

¹⁵² J.D.B. Miller, *Sir Winston Churchill and the Commonwealth of Nations* (St Lucia, QLD, 1966), p. 23.

Conclusion

‘As a postcolonial device, employed to regularise the relations between a former colonial power and its dependencies once they become independent, it has been a great success’.¹

J.D.B. Miller’s 1966 summation is typical of assessments of the Commonwealth made towards the end of the period being examined; it suggests that even if early hopes of being a ‘third force’ in the world had proven vastly over-optimistic, the Commonwealth nonetheless had value as a transitional body, providing a framework for newly-independent countries to operate in. To call it a ‘great success’ may seem sweeping and the use of ‘postcolonial’ as a temporal descriptor rather than an analytical paradigm problematic, but Miller at least makes clear that the Commonwealth was a construct: a ‘device’ rather than an accident. This is important to keep in mind; for all the improvisation and adaptation of the Commonwealth during the period, its transformation was not instantaneous. As the Commonwealth’s highest-level gathering, the Prime Ministers’ Conferences exemplified the high degree of continuity. As this thesis has noted, there were no new members between 1948 and 1957, and thus ample opportunity to refashion the Conferences, yet they remained consistent in format, with Asian prime ministers largely comfortable with pre-existing customs. Nor did changes to the character of the Commonwealth happen by chance: the loosening of ties was not a surprise by-product of decolonisation, but rather the corollary of the decision not to pursue a common foreign policy and unified defence command, even at the height of the Second World War. Given that Mackenzie King and Smuts, amongst others, had stoutly resisted the centralisation of policy in the Imperial Conference era, there were no false pretences that the post-War Commonwealth would be a hard bloc rather than a voluntary grouping. However, Miller goes too far in asserting that the Commonwealth was a device to regularise relations between Britain and its former

¹ J.D.B. Miller, *Sir Winston Churchill and the Commonwealth of Nations* (St. Lucia, QLD, 1966), p. 25.

possessions. On the contrary, this thesis has illustrated that the Commonwealth concept was predicated on forestalling the regularisation of relations, by positioning members as ‘not foreign’. The carefully cultivated ‘clubbish’ feel of the Conferences, suffused with familial language, was the opposite of the state visits and bilateral treaties which a strategy of regularisation would have called for. By completing the first full-length analysis of the Prime Ministers’ Conferences, this thesis has been able to provide additional context to the narrative of post-War decolonisation, showing that the Conferences were a genuine attempt to forge an informal vehicle for multilateral relations which avoided binding participants to strict blocs.

The Conferences were the centrepiece of post-independence relations. The act of gathering in London and welcoming the new member to the Conference table was the final ceremony of independence, and the best way to illustrate that the Commonwealth was not a continuation of Empire. In 1951, Patrick Gordon Walker told the House of Commons that ‘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’.² Britain possessively guarded its right to grant independence without input from other Commonwealth members. In 1948, Evatt failed to secure British support for a meeting between Ceylon and the dominions to discuss the form Ceylon’s Commonwealth participation would take, and in the late 1960s Britain insisted that any communiqué on Rhodesia acknowledged that ‘the authority and responsibility for guiding Rhodesia to independence rested with Britain’.³ Therefore it fell to the Conferences to symbolise the acceptance of a new nation as a ‘full member’. In this respect the informal atmosphere of the Conferences was as important as the act of formal acknowledgment in the communiqué. The

² Patrick Gordon Walker in House of Commons, 7 June 1951, in H. Duncan Hall, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (New York, 1971), p. 770.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 808; January 1966 Communique, *Commonwealth at the Summit*, p. 117.

applause and table thumping which broke out at the end of impassioned speeches in opposition to Britain entering the EEC proved that the Conferences did not exist to rubber-stamp British proposals.⁴ Similarly, the right to interject was a more authentic demonstration of equality amongst participants than any platitudinous communiqué. In 1964, for instance, Douglas-Home's opening address was interrupted by outbursts from Hastings Banda regarding 'pig-headed' imperialists, only four days after Malawi became independent.⁵ Just as leaders proved their independence by objecting to British proposals, they marked their transformation from dissident nationalists into international figures by accepting British hospitality and honours. This thesis has shown how the social aspects of the Conferences informed the political outcomes. The fact that trappings such as royal audiences and white-tie banquets remained broadly palatable throughout the period suggests that Commonwealth leaders did not find a complete regularisation of their relations with Britain necessary.

The six chapters of this thesis have plotted the changes in the Conferences from multiple perspectives, starting with the first chapter which assessed the role of London as a de facto Commonwealth capital, shaping the social milieu in which the Conferences took place. The second chapter provided a chronology until 1961, demonstrating how the Conferences drew upon their origins in the Imperial Conferences, as well as expediencies taken in the early Conferences of the 1940s, to create a set of customs which circumscribed innovation in format. The third chapter looked at the tumultuous Conferences from 1962 to 1969, observing how Britain used its structural authority as host to prop up its position in the face of heavy criticism. The fourth chapter assessed the role personality played in determining the tenor and outcomes of the Conferences, while the fifth chapter showed how much of the publicity dwelt on the familial character of the Conferences, encouraging audiences in Britain and abroad to look upon

⁴ 'Premiers assault on EEC - no voice in favour on first day of conference', *Guardian*, 12 September 1962.

⁵ Arnold Smith and Clyde Sanger, *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (London, 1983), p. 2.

Commonwealth leaders as 'not foreign'. The sixth chapter concentrated on the communiqués, showing how the desire to publish a text with a modicum of consensus inhibited the ability of the Commonwealth to transform free-flowing discussions into meaningful conclusions. Overall, the thesis argues that the Conferences were at the apex of attempts to preserve a distinct role for the Commonwealth in international affairs.

Much Commonwealth historiography has pointed to initiatives such as the Secretariat and suggested that the de-anglicisation of the Commonwealth has been pivotal to its survival. For example, Hyam argued that 'once anglocentricity was shed, Commonwealth multilateral diplomacy started yielding direct and indirect results'.⁶ Yet it is difficult to identify the disjuncture where anglocentricity was deliberately shed. When the principle of a Secretariat was finally accepted in 1964, Nkrumah made it clear that London was its natural home, and to this day its headquarters are a royal palace, Marlborough House. The only Conference held outside Britain during the period, in Lagos in January 1966, was organisationally almost identical to those in London. The 1971 change to CHOGMs, typically held outside London, is the most obvious candidate for a marker of de-anglicisation, but even this is not entirely convincing. Many of the CHOGMs of the 1970s and 1980s centred on Britain's policies towards Rhodesia and South Africa. As Stephen Chan put it: 'Britain's obstinacy lent to the remainder of the Commonwealth more apparent unity and power than it deserved'.⁷ Even if anglocentricity is taken to be a matter of culture rather than content, CHOGMs retained hints to their origins. The Royal Yacht *Britannia* was a floating venue for audiences and banquets at a number of meetings, while in 1991 in Harare the heads of government played a public cricket match.⁸ Even then the senior countries took precedence, with John Major of Britain and Bob Hawke of

⁶ Andrestinos N. Papadopoulos, *Multilateral Diplomacy within the Commonwealth* (The Hague, 1982), p. 139.

⁷ Stephen Chan, *Twelve Years of Commonwealth Diplomatic History: Commonwealth Summit Meetings 1979-1991* (Lewiston, 1992), p. 44.

⁸ Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford, 2014), p. 178.

Australia opening the batting.⁹ More importantly, the initiatives of the CHOGM-era Commonwealth owed something to the mindset of the Prime Ministers' Conferences, which prioritised personal relationships at the elite level over impersonal bureaucratic organisations. For example, the 1985 CHOGM appointed an 'Eminent Persons Group' comprised of seven former prime ministers or equivalent leaders, which met Nelson Mandela in gaol in 1986 and made recommendations regarding means of ending apartheid peacefully.¹⁰ The Group was similar to an idea from Sidney Holland in 1956 for an advisory body which 'might consist of individuals of eminence and rich experience in Commonwealth affairs rather than individual representatives of each member country ... There would be advantage often in going to some troubled area to get first-hand impressions'.¹¹

Reminders of the anglocentricity of CHOGMs, and the Prime Ministers' Conferences which preceded them should not, however, distract from the substantial failure the Commonwealth project was for Britain. The Conferences may have been successful in warding off feelings of foreignness amongst the political elite – and to some extent amongst the general public, given the high profile the Conferences had at the time – but overall they were characterised by the running down of preferential treatment rather than the creation of anything new. It could be argued that the Conferences were tainted by complications arising from the former imperial relationship, and a less anglocentric Commonwealth may have had more of an impact. However, many new Commonwealth countries were notably untroubled by continued British influence: Pakistan continued to appoint Britons as heads of its armed services for the first decade after independence while Nehru allowed Lord Mountbatten to persuade him to buy new British fighter planes by arranging an aerial display near his country residence, Broadlands, on

⁹ John Major, *More Than A Game: The Story of Cricket's Early Years* (London, 2007), p. 8.

¹⁰ Patti Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998), p. 95.

¹¹ Canadian High Commission, Wellington to Department of External Affairs, 4 May 1956, 'Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting - 1956', LAC RG25-A-3-b, volume 4776, file 50085-F-40.

the sidelines of the 1955 Conference.¹² Indeed, visiting leaders could be as troubled by the decline in British power as their host. Senior Indian civil servant Badr-ud-Din Tyabji recounted Nehru's gloom while residing at Claridge's for a Conference:

He had taken me out to the small balcony of his suite; and pointing out some of the great landmarks of London had said, I thought rather sadly, almost nostalgically "all this is finished now; this country can never be the same again". I had replied that the new social experiments that Britain was making might again give her a new kind of leadership in place of the one she had lost, but he seemed pessimistic.¹³

Such disillusion reinforces how the objective of the Commonwealth was not to regularise relations between members, but to retain a familial character. This was only possible if Britain retained sufficient prestige to justify being acknowledged as patriarch. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Britain could point to its stout resistance during the Blitz and the Allied triumph over the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific. Moreover, victory seemingly vindicated the Commonwealth's mode of operation; the support of the dominions was all the more impressive given it had been freely given, rather than required by treaty. Similarly, the cooperation of a number of members to create a Commonwealth brigade in the Korean War seemed to suggest that the Commonwealth's defence role could be reactivated when necessary without requiring a standing organisation. Yet after Korea there were few signs that Commonwealth membership provided any additional security. There was moral support and offers of aid for India in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and the success of British, Australian and New Zealand forces in assisting Malaysia in the Indonesian Confrontation in 1963-66. Yet there were no guarantees that Commonwealth members could rely on; before the 1965 Conference, The Gambia asked about British support in the event of a Senegalese invasion, but the British brief concluded that: 'It is not the normal practice nowadays to conclude formal defence agreements with Commonwealth members. In the event of an external threat to The Gambia from any source, HMG could not bind itself in advance to any particular course of

¹² Y.D. Gundevia, *Outside the Archives* (Hyderabad, 1984), p. 158.

¹³ Badr-ud-din Tyabji, *Memoirs of an Egoist – Volume 1 1907-1956* (New Delhi, 1988), p. 247.

action'.¹⁴ For all the fine phrases about equality, it was perhaps inevitable that the Commonwealth's importance would diminish in line with Britain's 'hard' power. At the 1969 Conference, the Tunku despaired at the decline in Britain's 'world role':

The lack of leadership is placing the Commonwealth in a void. The symptoms of the malaise are an apparent feeling of emptiness and insecurity in the hearts and minds of those who had previously looked to Britain for leadership. The Commonwealth has hitherto been a force in world affairs and this malaise could erode the position of influence we have so far enjoyed.¹⁵

To conclude, a pessimistic judgement is more realistic than Miller's optimistic summary. In 1959 Menzies wrote of the Commonwealth that: 'I think I might well write an account of this modern development which would represent it, not so much as an advance produced by a genius for compromise as a retreat produced by a feeling that diminishing resources require a cutting down of responsibility'.¹⁶

However, the fact that the Commonwealth became a more marginal body in international affairs does not detract from the usefulness of the Conferences as object of study. This thesis has shown that the structure of the Conferences was intrinsic to the trajectory of the Commonwealth. For instance, the need to find a form of the words for the 1961 communiqué proved the ultimate impediment to continued South African membership of the Commonwealth. Similarly, the agency possessed by a Conference solely comprised of prime ministers allowed a rapid decision to be made regarding Indian membership in 1949, without consulting national cabinets. More broadly, this thesis has made an original contribution to the literature by highlighting how the Conferences were a novel attempt at an intermediate mode of multilateral relations which was consciously 'non diplomatic', avoiding standing orders and a standing organisation for as long as possible. Even the formation of the Secretariat in 1965

¹⁴ 'Gambia: Military reinforcement', TNA CAB 133/305.

¹⁵ 'Text of speech by Tunku during the discussion on Commonwealth cooperation', 14 January 1969, ANZ ABHS 20358 W5400/85, KL 90/3/2.

¹⁶ Menzies to McEwen, 10 June 1959, Menzies papers, NLA MS 4936, box 21, folder 177.

did not seriously impact the way in which the Conferences continued to be shaped by the host nation. The attempt to sustain an international grouping without a secretariat has contemporary parallels in the G8 and G20, both of which are examples of the 'serial summitry' pioneered by the Prime Ministers' Conferences.¹⁷ Today the Commonwealth may be, as Richard Bourne put it, a 'G54', where heterogeneity is its chief merit.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it has proved worthwhile to examine the way in which the Conferences were used as a locus for a shared post-imperial identity. In 1949 during attempts to find a formula to keep India in the Commonwealth, one proposal considered was making the monarch ceremonial head of the Conferences. George VI's private secretary Alan Lascelles, advised against the idea, arguing 'nobody is going to die for a Conference'.¹⁹ The evolution of the Conferences between 1944 and 1969 proved him right. In the face of a rapid increase in members with their own post-independence nationalisms, it was a folly to think that a periodic Conference could provide any real sense of pan-Commonwealth unity. Nonetheless, the attempt by Commonwealth leaders to confer through informal and entirely voluntary Conferences was admirable in a period characterised by the division of nations into ideological blocs. To be 'not foreign to each other' was an aspiration worth trying.

¹⁷ Andrew F. Cooper and Mo Jongryn, 'The Middle 7 Initiative' in Mo Jongryn (ed.), *Middle Powers and G20 Governance* (New York, 2013), p. 119.

¹⁸ Richard Bourne in Greg Mills and John Stremlau (eds), *The Commonwealth in the 21st Century* (Johannesburg, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁹ Lascelles to George VI, 17 January 1949, in John Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI: His Life and Reign* (London, 1958), p. 722.

Appendix:

Chronology of Prime Ministers' Conferences

Conference Dates	Prime Ministers/Presidents (leaders other than heads of government indicated in parentheses)
1 – 16 May 1944	Australia: John Curtin Canada: W.L. Mackenzie King New Zealand: Peter Fraser South Africa: Jan Smuts United Kingdom: Winston Churchill
23 April – 25 May 1946	Australia: Ben Chifley Canada: W.L. Mackenzie King New Zealand: Walter Nash (Deputy Prime Minister) South Africa: Jan Smuts United Kingdom: Clement Attlee
11 – 22 October 1948	Australia: H.V. Evatt (Deputy Prime Minister) Canada: W.L. Mackenzie King Ceylon: Dudley Senanayake India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Peter Fraser Pakistan: Liaquat Ali Khan South Africa: Eric Louw (Minister of Mines and Economic Affairs) Southern Rhodesia: Godfrey Huggins United Kingdom: Clement Attlee
22 – 27 April 1949	Australia: Ben Chifley Canada: Lester Pearson (Secretary of State for External Affairs) Ceylon: Dudley Senanayake India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Peter Fraser Pakistan: Liaquat Ali Khan South Africa: Daniel Malan United Kingdom: Clement Attlee
4 – 13 January 1951	Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: Louis St Laurent Ceylon: Dudley Senanayake India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Sidney Holland Pakistan: Liaquat Ali Khan South Africa: T.E. Donges (Minister of the Interior) Southern Rhodesia: Godfrey Huggins United Kingdom: Clement Attlee
3 – 9 June 1953	Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: Louis St Laurent Ceylon: Dudley Senanayake India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Sidney Holland

	<p>Pakistan: Mohammed Ali South Africa: Daniel Malan Southern Rhodesia: Sir Godfrey Huggins United Kingdom: Sir Winston Churchill</p>
26 January – 9 February 1955	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: Louis St Laurent Ceylon: Sir John Kotelawala India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Sidney Holland Pakistan: Mohammed Ali Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Sir Godfrey Huggins South Africa: C.R. Swart (Deputy Prime Minister) United Kingdom: Sir Winston Churchill</p>
27 June – 6 July 1956	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: Louis St Laurent Ceylon: S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: Sidney Holland Pakistan: Chaudhry Mohammed Ali Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Viscount Malvern South Africa: J.G. Strijdom United Kingdom: Sir Anthony Eden</p>
26 June – 5 July 1957	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: John Diefenbaker Ceylon: M.W.H. de Silva (Leader of the Senate and Minister of Justice) Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah India: Jawaharlal Nehru New Zealand: T.L. Macdonald (Minister of External Affairs and Defence) Pakistan: H.S. Suhrawardy Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Sir Roy Welensky South Africa: Eric Louw (Minister of External Affairs) United Kingdom: Harold Macmillan</p>
3 – 13 May 1960	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: John Diefenbaker Ceylon: E.J. Cooray (Minister of Justice) Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah India: Jawaharlal Nehru Malaya: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra New Zealand: Walter Nash Pakistan: Mohammed Ayub Khan Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Sir Roy Welensky South Africa: Eric Louw (Minister of External Affairs) United Kingdom: Harold Macmillan</p>
8 – 17 March 1961	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: John Diefenbaker Ceylon: Sirimavo Bandaranaike Cyprus: Archbishop Makarios Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah India: Jawaharlal Nehru</p>

	<p>Malaya: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Pakistan: Mohammed Ayub Khan Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Sir Roy Welensky South Africa: Hendrik Verwoerd United Kingdom: Harold Macmillan</p>
10 – 19 September 1962	<p>Australia: Robert Menzies Canada: John Diefenbaker Ceylon: S.P.C. Fernando (Minister of Justice) Cyprus: Archbishop Makarios Ghana: F.K.D. Goka (Minister of Finance and Trade) India: Jawaharlal Nehru Jamaica: Sir Alexander Bustamante Malaya: Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein (Acting Prime Minister) New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Pakistan: Mohammed Ayub Khan Rhodesia and Nyasaland: Sir Roy Welensky Sierra Leone: Sir Milton Margai Tanganyika: R.M. Kajawa Trinidad and Tobago: Eric Williams United Kingdom: Harold Macmillan</p>
8 – 15 July 1964	<p>Australia: Sir Robert Menzies Canada: Lester Pearson Ceylon: Sirimavo Bandaranaike Cyprus: Spyros Kyprianou (Minister of Foreign Affairs) Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah India: T.T. Krishnamachari (Minister of Finance) Jamaica: Donald Sangster (Minister of Finance) Kenya: Jomo Kenyatta Malawi: Hastings Banda Malaysia: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Pakistan: Mohammed Ayub Khan Sierra Leone: Sir Albert Margai Tanganyika and Zanzibar: Julius Nyerere Trinidad and Tobago: Eric Williams Uganda: Milton Obote United Kingdom: Sir Alec Douglas-Home</p>
17 – 25 June 1965	<p>Australia: Sir Robert Menzies Canada: Lester Pearson Ceylon: AF Wijemanne (Minister of Justice) Cyprus: Spyros Kyprianou (Minister of Foreign Affairs) The Gambia: Sir Dawda Jawara Ghana: Kwame Nkrumah India: Lal Bahadur Shastri Jamaica: Donald Sangster (Deputy Prime Minister) Kenya: Joseph Murumbi (Minister of External Affairs) Malawi: Hastings Banda</p>

	<p>Malaysia: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Malta: Giorgio Borg Olivier New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Pakistan: Mohammed Ayub Khan Sierra Leone: Sir Albert Margai Tanzania: Julius Nyerere Trinidad and Tobago: Eric Williams Uganda: Milton Obote United Kingdom: Harold Wilson Zambia: Kenneth Kaunda</p>
10 – 12 January 1966 (Lagos)	<p>Canada: Lester Pearson Ceylon: A.F. Wijemanne (Minister of Justice) Cyprus: Archbishop Makarios The Gambia: Sir Dawda Jawara India: Asoke Sen (Minister of Law) Jamaica: Donald Sangster (Acting Prime Minister) Kenya: James Gichuru (Minister of Finance) Malawi: Hastings Banda Malaysia: Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein (Deputy Prime Minister) Malta: Giorgio Borg Olivier New Zealand: Sir Thomas Macdonald (New Zealand High Commissioner to the United Kingdom) Nigeria: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Pakistan: Hakim M. Ahson (Pakistani High Commissioner to Nigeria) Sierra Leone: Sir Albert Margai Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Trinidad and Tobago: P.J.V. Solomon (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs) Uganda: Milton Obote United Kingdom: Harold Wilson Zambia: R.C. Kamanga (Vice-President)</p>
6 – 15 September 1966	<p>Australia: Harold Holt Canada: Lester Pearson Ceylon: A.F. Wijemanne (Minister of Justice) Cyprus: Archbishop Makarios The Gambia: Sir Dawda Jawara Ghana: J.W.K. Harlley (Deputy Chairman, National Liberation Council) Guyana: Forbes Burnham India: Sardar Swaran Singh (Minister of External Affairs) Jamaica: Donald Sangster (Acting Prime Minister) Kenya: Joseph Murumbi (Vice-President) Malawi: Hastings Banda Malaysia: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Malta: Giorgio Borg Olivier New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Babafemi Ogundipe (Nigerian High Commissioner-designate to the United Kingdom) Pakistan: Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (Foreign Minister)</p>

	<p>Sierra Leone: Sir Albert Margai Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Trinidad and Tobago: P.J.V. Solomon (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs) Uganda: Milton Obote United Kingdom: Harold Wilson Zambia: Simon Kapwepwe (Minister of Foreign Affairs)</p>
<p>7 – 15 January 1969</p>	<p>Australia: John Gorton Barbados: Errol Barrow Botswana: Sir Seretse Khama Canada: Pierre Trudeau Ceylon: Dudley Senanayake Cyprus: Archbishop Makarios The Gambia: Sir Dawda Jawara Ghana: JWK Harley (Deputy Chairman, National Liberation Council) Guyana: Forbes Burnham India: Indira Ghani Jamaica: HL Shearer Kenya: James Gichuru (Minister of Finance) Lesotho: Leabua Jonathan Malawi: Hastings Banda Malaysia: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Malta: Giorgio Borg Olivier Mauritius: Sir Seewoosague Ramgoolam New Zealand: Keith Holyoake Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo (Deputy Chairman, Federal Executive Council) Pakistan: M. Arshad Hussain (Minister for Foreign Affairs) Sierra Leone: Siaka Pyobyn Stevens Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Swaziland: Prince Makhosini Dlamini Tanzania: Julius Nyerere Trinidad and Tobago: Eric Williams Uganda: Milton Obote United Kingdom: Harold Wilson Zambia: Kenneth Kaunda</p>

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