

St. George's

"OF THINGS TO COME"

*A Citizens' Forum on Canada in the
Post-war World*

Bulletin No. 10

*Canada in the
British
Commonwealth*

Tuesday, February 22nd

*Published by
The Canadian Association for Adult Education*

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to accompany the C.B.C. broadcast of the same date.

Canada in the British Commonwealth

The oldest of Canada's connections with the outside world has been through our membership in the British Empire. Tonight we are going to discuss what the future of that relationship will be.

This is a subject which arouses many varying sentiments across the country. In a land with as many different regions and peoples as Canada has, such difference in feeling is only natural. A French-speaking Canadian in Quebec or an Icelandic Canadian in Manitoba (both of whom may be believers in the Empire) naturally have not the same emotional attachment to Great Britain as many Anglo-Saxon Canadians with friends and relatives in the British Isles. On the other hand, certain Canadians cannot be expected to give up their deep-seated loyalty towards the Empire.

But quite apart from strong feelings and prejudices on both sides, what we must try to do is face facts. Our membership in the Empire has been a fact. Whatever our feelings or prejudices may be, in the future we will have to adopt some attitude towards that fact. Refusing to face it will not produce any policy. As adult members of a democracy, we must try to see clearly and with sanity what our relationship has been in the past and what it should be in the future. If we are to reach any sound conclusion, it must be done by thinking the problem out, not by getting angry about it.

CANADA AND THE EMPIRE

Since the conquest of French Canada in 1759-1763, Canada has always been part of the British Empire. Even when the American colonies to the south broke away to form the U.S.A., the various parts of Canada remained British. In fact this connection was strengthened by the revolution, for thousands of Americans desirous of living under the British crown moved north to become Canadians. Throughout the next century two facts emerged as to our membership in the British Empire. The first of these was that our part in the larger unit helped protect us against any attack from abroad. The pioneering colony had the weight of Great Britain behind it, to keep it alive and to provide it with the vast sums of capital it so badly needed for expansion. But, however firm our membership in the British Empire may have been, the second main tendency was a growing trend towards self-government. More and more we began to handle our own affairs and not

to leave them in the hands of the British government in London. By the time the Dominion of Canada was created in 1867 this had been achieved. We had control over all matters of home affairs. Our relationships with the rest of the world, however, were still in the hands of the British government.

But as our country expanded from coast to coast and we multiplied in population and wealth, it was not possible to remain even a colony to that extent: we became a country in our own right and in charge of our own foreign relations. This was brought to a head by the Great War of 1914-1918. The vast contribution of Canada to the victories of the Allies proved to the world and to ourselves that we were, in truth, a country in our own right. If we were capable of putting armies in the field, we felt ourselves capable of conducting our own foreign relations.

Finally by the Statute of Westminster of 1931, Canada, along with the other Dominions was officially recognized as an independent and sovereign power with control over her destiny. We were no longer a colony in an empire, we were a member of a new organization, the British Commonwealth, — a freely cooperating partnership of independent nations linked together by common allegiance to the crown. Yes, though independent and completely self-governing we remained a member of the British Commonwealth. Our connections of tradition and friendship, our close trade connections, the large sums of capital that England had lent us, kept the bonds alive.

What exactly that membership in the Commonwealth involved was, however, never clear. Over and over again in the years before the war, the government affirmed that membership in the Commonwealth did not in any way mean that we had any commitments to go to war if Great Britain were at war. As the menace of Nazi Germany was becoming more intense the Prime Minister stated clearly in March, 1939, that Canada had no automatic commitments to the British Commonwealth or to any other body. There were many in the country who agreed with this, saying that Canada should not commit itself in any way. There were others, however, who said that this policy of no commitments was unworthy of Canada, as we gained benefits from the weight of the British navy and were not willing to give anything in exchange.

THE WAR — 1939

When war came we entered the struggle by act of our own parliament. Yet by that declaration it was shown that our membership in the British Commonwealth was a very real thing to many of

us. We were the only North or South American country with connections outside the hemisphere. We were the only country that declared war. Other countries in the Americas had as much to fear from a Hitler-dominated Europe, other countries had as great a need to keep the trade routes of the world open. But only Canada declared war. There were many other reasons for our declaration of war, but it cannot be denied that loyalty to the British Commonwealth was one.

DURING THE WAR

During the war we have remained part of the British Commonwealth. Between 1940 and 1941, we were Great Britain's largest ally. But always our collaboration has been as one free country to another. There has been nothing like the Imperial War Cabinet of the last war when broad lines of policy was laid down by a meeting of representatives of all the Empire. In this war the cooperation has been carried out by constant informal meetings between members of the British and Canadian governments.

AFTER THE WAR — WHAT

After the war what will be our relationship to the British Commonwealth? Recent public opinion polls reflect an ever-growing interest in world affairs. The leaders of all the main parties in Parliament have declared in recent debates that we can no longer live by ourselves. As one said, "It must be clear now to the most stupid person in the civilized world that no nation can stand alone. Let Canada be prepared to stand with all the other nations who are seeking to build a better world." (H. C. Green). How we are to do this is now the point. Our membership in the British Empire was Canada's first tie with the outside world. What part will it play as part of our relations with the outside world in the future?

There seem to be three main attitudes towards our membership in the British Commonwealth in the future. Let us examine these.

No Commitments The first is that we should remain in the British Commonwealth but that our membership should involve us in no commitments of any kind. This would be the same situation as before the war. It is well exemplified by a speech of the Prime Minister in March 1939. The advantages of a policy of this sort is that it would leave us free to make our own choice on all relations with the outside world. On the other hand, many people point out the disadvantages. They say that Canada is too small a country to stand alone, that we must have some close and practical link with some other organization. They feel that this policy of no automatic commitments will not keep us from being involved in world affairs, and that we will only drift into a mess by trying to act alone.

Stronger Ties The second attitude towards the Commonwealth is that it should be bound together with firmer organization than it was before the war, and that it should act with one voice on foreign affairs. The argument put forth to support a policy of this sort is that Canada, a country of eleven million people, needs to unite with other nations. Its natural unity is with the countries of the British Commonwealth. Canada would thus be part of a large combination of nations, and by the weight of that combination it could make its voice felt in the world. The disadvantages of such a policy have also been pointed out. It is said that a British bloc of nations acting together would create suspicion and unfriendliness in the rest of the world. Some people cite the Ottawa agreements of 1932 where the British nations acting together set up a tariff policy, excluding the other nations of the world from the Empire markets, which policy caused great bitterness in the rest of the world.

World Cooperation The third attitude is that we should remain a member of the British Commonwealth, cooperating with our fellow members—but that this membership should not prevent us taking an active part in other world organizations, like the United Nations. Some point out on the other hand, that no effective world organization is going to materialize hence we had better stick either to the British Empire, to the U.S.A., or a mixture of both, for our support. Those who believe in world organization affirm, however, that only through world organization can we solve the world problems of war and depression. They see no reason why we cannot continue as members of both the United Nations and the British Commonwealth. In this way we could keep our traditional bonds of friendship with the British countries and also go farther and take our part in building a united world.

These, then, seem to be the three main attitudes as to our future place in the British Commonwealth. So far there has not been much accurate or detailed public discussion in Canada as to what policy we should adopt. In the most recent debate in the House of Commons at Ottawa on foreign affairs (July 1943), most of our parliamentarians agreed that we should remain members of the Commonwealth but few described in any way what form that membership should take. There was a good deal of discussion of broad principles of foreign policy—but little on practical policies.

PROPOSALS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

In other parts of the British Commonwealth, however, there has been more discussion of a detailed nature. Recently, indeed, the Prime Ministers of both Australia and South Africa have put forward some definite proposals for Empire reorganization. Let us examine these for a moment and see what bearing they have on Canada's future role.

In a speech in the autumn of 1943 Prime Minister John Curtin of Australia proposed that a permanent Conference of British Empire Prime Ministers should be set up that would meet regularly to consult on policies of common interest. As it would be impossible for the various Prime Ministers to be away from home continually, a permanent organization might carry on the work of this Conference allowing for continuous consultation between the various parts of the Empire and Commonwealth. He did not feel that this would in any way interfere with the independence of the various parts of the Commonwealth—but thought it would help in working together. He also stated firmly that this British Commonwealth organization would in no way interfere with the working of the larger United Nations; it would only mean that within the United Nations the British peoples were working together.

The second proposal came from the Prime Minister of South Africa, General Smuts. He also stated that the United Nations are the core of future world peace and prosperity. But he felt that within the United Nations the power of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. might overshadow that of the British Empire and Commonwealth. To create a better balance he proposes two things:

First, the British Commonwealth should add to its number by including some of the democracies of western Europe in its fold. These countries should come in as members of the Commonwealth, free and sovereign as we in Canada are, but working together to achieve certain common purposes. From this the Commonwealth would gather greater strength while these new countries would have greater security.

The second proposal was that the Commonwealth and Empire should be knit closer together. Up to now, the British Colonial Empire has been centralized under the control of Great Britain. General Smuts suggests that the administration of the colonial Empire should be split up so that each part of the Commonwealth would take its responsibility in administering the colonies in its particular region. In this way South Africa would play its part in the administering of certain African colonies, Australia would look after certain South Pacific islands, and Canada would presumably take its part in the administration of certain West Indian islands.

These then are two new proposals as to the future of the British Commonwealth. They must be in our minds when we discuss what the future of our relations to the Empire are going to be. In both of them is the assumption that the world is going to be organized on the basis of blocks of power as it has been in the past. Their purpose is to unite the power of the British nations. But what must be remembered is that the speakers are the Prime Ministers of Australia and South Africa. Canada is in a different position. If we are in a world where powerful organizations are going to compete against each other, we will fall between the orbits of two powerful organizations. For we are not only members of the British Commonwealth, we are also closely connected with the U.S.A. Whatever we do as members of the British Commonwealth we must remember that we are neighbors of the U.S.A. as well.

So Canada moves into that future. Our relations to the Commonwealth is one of the important decisions influencing that future. One of the essential points in that relationship and in all our other ones is what will our position as a nation be. Will we be merely influenced by the power of the U.S.A. and the British Empire, gravitating between these two centres at London and Washington? Or will we be able to play a part of our own, influenced in some things by these two great powers—but not completely dominated by them? As part of that discussion the subject next Tuesday is *Canada in the Anglo-American World*—in the shadow or a new power?

MORE INFORMATION

- Canadian External Relations*: G. P. de J. Glazebrook. 1942. Oxford Press. A scholarly interpretation of Canada's external relations with emphasis on our varying status.
- Canada After the War*: ed. by A. Brady and F. R. Scott. Macmillan. 1943. The fifth chapter by Professor Soward is particularly interesting.
- Canada in World Affairs*: ed. R. M. Dawson. 1943. Oxford.
- Canada's Attitude Toward the Present Day World Problems*: W. L. M. King. King's Printer. Speech by the Prime Minister just before the war, discussing Canada's policy of no automatic commitments.
- Debates of the Canadian House of Commons*: July 9th and 19th, 1943. King's Printer. The latest statements of our parliamentarians on foreign policy.
- Are Empires Doomed?* Lionel Gelber. Ryerson Press. 1943. 32 pp. 40c. A plea for the continuation of Empire throughout the world.
- Subject India*: H. N. Brailsford. London. Gollanz. 1943. A left wing view of the Empire, especially in relation to India.
- Thoughts on the New World*: General Smuts. London. 1943. The Times Publishing Co. Thoughts by the Prime Minister of South Africa on the future of the Empire.

FILMS

BATTLE FOR FREEDOM. A panorama on what each section of the British Commonwealth is doing in the war.

WINGS OF YOUTH. Canada and the operation of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan. (Running time—19 minutes.)

REPORT QUESTIONS

1. What role in the British Commonwealth will best serve Canada's national interests in the future?
2. Will our membership in the British Commonwealth keep us from assuming responsibility in a larger world organization like the United Nations?
3. Should there be closer ties between the various parts of the British Commonwealth than there were before the war? (e.g. an imperial council as the Prime Minister of Australia has suggested?). What effect would these ties have on Canada and the world?

SEND YOUR REPORTS TO YOUR PROVINCIAL OFFICE

FURTHER QUESTIONS

1. What effect did an imperial tariff policy like the Ottawa agreements have on the prosperity of Canada and the peace of the world?
2. What responsibility does Canada have as a member of the British Empire, towards India and the colonies?
3. Should Canada have individual representation at the peace conference or should we be part of a joint British Empire delegation?
4. General Smuts, the Prime Minister of South Africa, has suggested that after the war the various Dominions should be responsible for some of the British colonies, in their respective regions. What do you think of this scheme? How would it affect Canada?

Next Week - - CANADA IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WORLD

