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1

Britain, the Commonwealth and Europe: an Overview

Sir Donald Maitland

When touring Australia in 1884, Lord Rosebery, who was later to become British Foreign Secretary, made a speech in Adelaide in which he referred to 'the British Commonwealth of Nations'.¹ This is believed to be the first use in public of the term 'Commonwealth' in the context of a grouping of nations. It was not until 1926 that this concept was more precisely defined. Lord Balfour, a former Prime Minister, who had returned to office in 1922 as Foreign Secretary, described Britain and the Dominions as 'autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status and in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations'.² Five years later – in 1931 – this relationship was enshrined in the Statute of Westminster – an Act of the British Parliament which conferred on the Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland and the Irish Free State the power to repeal or amend acts of the British Parliament which applied to them. It was this Act of Parliament which created what came to be known as Dominion Status.

At the time of Lord Rosebery's Australian tour Britain regarded itself as a dominant imperial power, and Lord Rosebery's intention was to suggest a way of linking Britain – the 'mother country' – with the new nations created in other parts of the globe by waves of emigrants from the British Isles. Imperial sentiment at the highest political level had been fostered by Disraeli, whose idea it was that Queen Victoria should be made Empress of India – a title she assumed in 1876. Europe meanwhile had been enjoying a prolonged period of peace inaugurated by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The Crimean War in the mid-1850s, which was a product of one of the misunderstandings which have

bedevilled relations between Turkey and its Slav neighbours, was of marginal importance in political terms.

The main preoccupation of the British in the second half of the nineteenth century was competition with other powers over colonization, particularly in Africa. This may explain why, in the early years of the new century, the British government of the day was slow to appreciate the danger posed by the young, irascible, ill-educated, impetuous German Kaiser. Wilhelm II had built up the German navy and frustrated attempts by his rivals elsewhere in Europe to keep his ambitions in check. Too late Britain and France awoke to the danger. In the summer of 1914 German armies marched into Belgium and the world slid into the 'war to end all wars'. Although for centuries it had been a prime objective of English, and later British, foreign policy to prevent the domination of continental Europe by any single power, the lesson was not learned and, a generation later, hostilities with Germany were resumed in 1939. The war which followed – the most destructive in human history – changed the world. But, as the story of the years which have passed since then has shown, not all attitudes have changed with the times.

Like the course of true love, the process of integration in Europe over the past fifty years has not run smooth. There have been notable successes, such as the binding together by the Treaty of Paris in 1952 of the coal and steel industries in western Europe and the decision in 1986 to create a Single Market. Along the way there have also been serious errors. The first of these was the decision by the British government of the day to stand aside when the negotiations began which led to the signature of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and the formation of the European Economic Community. With the benefit of hindsight the attitude of those in authority in London at that time seems to have been remarkably obtuse. The advice from British embassies in the capitals of the six countries which were to form the new Community was clear; this was indeed the start of an important process which would directly affect British interests. It was also their view that the determination of the six governments was such that they could be expected to make every effort to ensure the success of the venture. In the event, this advice was ignored.

The political miscalculations of the late 1940s and 1950s undoubtedly damaged British interests. However, it is only fair to judge those decisions in the light of the circumstances of the time. Alone among the countries of western Europe, Britain had been neither defeated nor occupied. For over five years the British had sustained their resistance

to Nazi Germany in close alliance with the United States and supported by the countries of the Commonwealth. British and Commonwealth forces played a major part in the liberation of Europe in 1944 and 1945, repeating their success in the North African and Italian campaigns. In South East Asia, the main instrument of victory over the Japanese was the Indian Army, officered largely, but not exclusively, by British officers, but manned by every race from the subcontinent.

The strategic direction of the allies' war effort was essentially in Anglo-American hands. Collaboration between the British Prime Minister and the American President, between their military commanders, between the Foreign Office and the State Department and the respective treasuries, reached unprecedented levels. The intimate working relationships established during the war persisted into the immediately following period when the problems of reconstruction, reconciliation and securing the peace were addressed. Several British ministers and their senior advisers in the key Whitehall departments had been personally involved in these events and the habit of consultation and, where possible, cooperation with the United States was deeply ingrained. If the word 'mindset' had been in vogue in the 1940s and 1950s, it would have neatly and accurately described attitudes which had become instinctive. In the same way, the view London took of the Commonwealth was coloured not by delusions of imperial grandeur, but by grateful recognition of the contribution forces from the Commonwealth had made during the struggle for survival. The Commonwealth relationship had stood the test and deserved to be nourished and adapted to changing circumstances. It was understood that the withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent marked the end of colonialism and this raised important questions about the future of the Commonwealth and the colonial empire. This was recognised by the substitution of the name 'Commonwealth Relations Office' for 'Dominions Office' in 1947.

The critical error at this time was the failure once again of the political leadership in London to heed the warning uttered early this century by the American philosopher, George Santayana, in his monumental *Life of Reason* when he wrote: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'.³ In facing the challenges of the postwar world in the 1940s and early 1950s, political leaders in London seem to have been so determined to preserve the platform of common interest and common objectives from which the victory of the allies had been launched that they neglected the critical lessons to be drawn from the events of the 1930s which had led to the war. At Zurich, Amsterdam and elsewhere, Winston Churchill, as leader of the opposition, had

advocated the need for unity in Europe; but, when he returned to power as Prime Minister in 1951, he showed little enthusiasm for the idea he had so eloquently propounded. Anthony Eden, his Foreign Secretary, showed similar indifference to developments across the Channel. He had become absorbed in his self-selected role as peacemaker in Trieste, Austria, Indo-China and finally, and disastrously, in the Middle East.

For those who had suffered under the German occupation, analysis of the causes of the war was a main preoccupation. As early as 1943 Jean Monnet had set out his conclusion and his prescription. He was determined that the allies should not only win the war, but also win the peace.⁴ His overriding aim was to find a peaceful way of containing the size and strength of Germany at the centre of the continent and his proposals were designed to this end. His formula was not simply the free flow of goods, but a change in the relationship between peoples who would no longer think in national terms but in terms of shared responsibilities.

The steady progress being made by the members of the European Economic Community following the signature of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 persuaded Harold Macmillan, who had succeeded Eden as British Prime Minister in that year, to consider a reversal of Britain's attitude to the European Economic Community. In the summer of 1960 exploratory talks were held in their capitals with the leaders of the six member states. Commonwealth representatives were also consulted. The lack of enthusiasm of the older members of the Commonwealth – Australia, Canada and New Zealand – had been expected, but the opposition of the major Commonwealth countries in the developing world, and notably Nigeria, was a surprise, since they stood to benefit from the Association Agreements contained in Section 4 of the Treaty of Rome.

These soundings persuaded the British government to test the ground with the members of the Community as a whole. The meeting of the Western European Union on 27 February 1961 provided the opportunity. Edward Heath, who had been appointed Lord Privy Seal to act as deputy to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Home, and spokesman on foreign affairs in the House of Commons, said then: '...if the Common Market countries can meet our Commonwealth and agricultural difficulties, the United Kingdom can then consider a system based on a common or harmonised tariff on raw materials and manufactured goods imported from countries other than the Seven [i.e. the EFTA countries], or the Commonwealth'.⁵ The ministers from the

member states of the Community present at that meeting, as well as the international press, recognized that this statement represented a significant advance on the previous British position.

British embassies in the capitals of 'the Six' reported a general desire for Britain to join the Community. In some member states it was hoped that, given Britain's world-wide interests, its accession would check any inward-looking tendencies within the Community. Reactions in the Commonwealth were predictably less enthusiastic and members of the British cabinet visited a number of Commonwealth capitals in order to explain the general advantages which would flow from British membership of the Community. However, in Australia and New Zealand in particular this message was ill-received. Despite this, the cabinet endorsed Harold Macmillan's proposal that negotiations to join the Community should be opened. This decision was announced in the House of Commons on 30 July 1961 and was broadly endorsed. Such misgivings as were expressed related to the impact on the Commonwealth and on the sovereignty of the United Kingdom.

Edward Heath was charged with the conduct of the negotiations. He formed two delegations to support him – one resident in Brussels to monitor events in the Community, and the other, a high-level peripatetic team, which would advise him at the negotiating table. Among their other duties these two delegations were required to ensure that Commonwealth countries and other interested parties were fully briefed on the progress of the negotiations through their representatives in Brussels and London.

Even before the formal negotiations began a number of prominent personalities in member states of the Community recommended privately that the best course for the United Kingdom would be to accede to the Treaties of Paris and Rome at once and negotiate the appropriate terms afterwards from within. Though well-intentioned, this advice was unrealistic. The problems affecting the Commonwealth and agriculture in particular were not minor, and acceptance in advance of the provisions of the Treaties would have seriously reduced Edward Heath's room for manoeuvre. Apart from this, there was no prospect of Parliament endorsing such a course of action.

As soon as the negotiations began the nature of the issues to be resolved became clear. In accepting the principle of a single external tariff the United Kingdom assumed an obligation to reduce most existing tariffs. This, and the imposition of quotas, created problems for Commonwealth countries as well as some of the colonial territories. On behalf of the countries of the Indian subcontinent, for example,

Edward Heath put forward a strong case for unlimited entry for tea – a commodity in direct competition with coffee – and at the end of the day this was agreed. Although the trade of colonial territories was safeguarded under the Treaty of Rome, for reasons which were never fully explained a number of the larger territories declined to take advantage of the privileges on offer. In due course the Lomé Convention provided essential assistance to the Commonwealth countries among its seventy-odd beneficiaries.

The agricultural trade of the old members of the Commonwealth was the subject of hard negotiation and reasonable terms were agreed in the spring and summer of 1962. However, immediately before the summer recess the French tabled new proposals for a tariff on imports of temperate zone agricultural products, which would have had the effect of maintaining the price of domestic products. This formula seemed to contradict what had already been agreed. This was not a good omen but, when the negotiations resumed after the summer break, steady progress continued to be made.

During the interval in the negotiations a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting was held in London. On the eve of the meeting Edward Heath discussed tactics with his senior advisers. Also present at this briefing meeting was the Press Secretary at 10 Downing Street, who disclosed that the Prime Minister was not looking forward to the expected onslaught from his fellow Heads of Government. On cue the Indian Prime Minister put forward the case for special treatment for tea, and the Australians asked for parallel treatment for currants from Victoria. However, the principal objections were political. Harold Macmillan argued that the days of the Empire were over and that Britain would acquire more political and economic influence as a member of the Community than outside it; this would be of direct benefit to the Commonwealth. On the main economic issues he was able to satisfy his colleagues that the best possible terms for their trade in the wider market which would become available to them when Britain joined the Community had been secured, and they left London moderately reassured.

The arguments were overtaken by President de Gaulle's veto in January 1963 and the files were put into the pending tray until Harold Wilson, who had become Prime Minister in 1964, and his Foreign Secretary, George Brown, embarked on their tour of the six member states in the early months of 1967. At a meeting of the Council of the Western European Union in July of that year George Brown submitted a second application on behalf of the United Kingdom for membership

of the European Communities. This application was no more successful. In November of that year it too was vetoed by President de Gaulle. The files went back into the pending tray.

The arrival at the Elysée Palace of President Georges Pompidou in 1969 altered the situation and offered Edward Heath, when he became Prime Minister in June 1970, the opportunity to pursue his ambition. One of his first acts was to register the determination of the new government to pursue the effort to join the European Economic Community. With the bitter experience of 1963 much in his mind, the Prime Minister decided that the first step should be to persuade the French of the good intentions of the United Kingdom. A confidential link was established with the Elysée through which ideas and preoccupations could be discussed in parallel with the formal accession negotiations with the Council of Ministers of the Community.⁶

On the United Kingdom side these negotiations were conducted by a team led by Geoffrey Rippon, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. In the different atmosphere that now prevailed, the points of difficulty were steadily reduced. For its part, the United Kingdom was willing to accept the system of Community finance provided that an adequate transitional period could be agreed, but it was anxious to ensure that the legitimate needs of dairy farmers in New Zealand and Commonwealth sugar producers were accommodated. In the end access to the large market for New Zealand butter and cheese was agreed on terms acceptable to New Zealand. Likewise, members of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement approved the terms negotiated for their exports. By the middle of May 1971 sufficient progress had been made through both channels to justify a meeting between the Prime Minister and the French President. This took place in Paris on 20 and 21 May.

President Pompidou told Edward Heath that, for historical reasons, France and Britain carried a special responsibility in regard to developing countries. Those in the Commonwealth would enjoy the same preferential treatment as the former colonies of existing members of the Community. Pompidou's main anxiety was the position of sterling as a reserve currency. It was a basic principle that the currencies of the member states should enjoy equal status. The ultimate goal of economic and monetary union set out in the Treaty of Rome could not otherwise be attained. Edward Heath agreed that every effort would be made to reduce the sterling balances, provided that the interests of those holding the balances were not harmed and that no unacceptable burden was placed on the United Kingdom's balance of payments.

It was also important that the rate of the pound should be maintained. The understandings reached during these critical discussions at the Elysée Palace were subsequently endorsed by the Community Council of Ministers on 7 June 1971.

When their talks had ended, President Pompidou led Edward Heath into the Salon des Fêtes, where his predecessor had pronounced his veto in 1963. The press were already assembled. When he made clear that there were no longer any obstacles to Britain's entry into the European Economic Community, everyone present understood that they were witnesses to a moment of historical importance. Neither Europe, nor the United Kingdom, nor the Commonwealth would be the same again.

In the years that have passed since then, the producers of temperate foodstuffs in the Commonwealth have found new markets and have forged new relationships. The developing members have taken full advantage of the Lomé Agreements and defend their interests in the councils of the World Trade Organization.

What, then, of the future? The European Union will pursue its way along the path that does not run smooth. The Commonwealth will continue to develop its unique personality and to exercise its influence for good in every corner of the world. The international community as a whole will be the beneficiary. So there is no reason today for the noble and worldly-wise Lords Rosebery and Balfour, or any other architects of the Commonwealth in ages past, to turn in their graves.

Notes

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3. George Santayana, *Life of Reason*, Vol. 1 (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1905), chapter 12: 'Flux and Constancy in Human Nature'. See Paul-Henri Spaak, *The Continuing Battle: Memoirs of a European* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), chapter 29.
4. Jean Monnet, *Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1978), chapter 12.
5. *The Times*, 28 February 1961.
6. Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon, *The Heath Government, 1970–74: a Re-Appraisal* (London: Longman, 1996), chapter 11.

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