Canadians and Their Commonwealth

The Rt. Hon.
Vincent Massey

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CANADIANS AND THEIR COMMONWEALTH

By
THE RT. HON.
VINCENT MASSEY, C.H.

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I

May I express my deep sense of honour at being invited to address you? The names of those who have preceded your present guest as lecturers on this foundation can only produce in him a feeling of honest humility, and indeed some real apprehension.

George Romanes was born in Canada, but pursued his studies at Cambridge. I have not been able to discover why a Cambridge scholar should have founded a Lecturership in Oxford; this must be regarded, however, as a happy example of academic coexistence! Canada could ill afford at this early stage of her development (perhaps not even now) to lose such an intellect, but as compensation for the loss of Romanes to Cambridge we received at about the same time the Regius Professor of History at Oxford. Goldwin Smith is a well-known figure in Canadian history; he is, perhaps, less well known in his own university. He was one of the first to stir Canadians into a ferment of introspection and preoccupation with their future as a people and nation, persisting to the present. He applied stark logic to the problems of the Canada he found a hundred years ago. He was a natural iconoclast. I confess to a special interest in his reference to the office of Governor-General: 'Religious Canada', he observed, 'prays each Sunday that [he] may govern well, on the understanding that heaven will never be so unconstitutional as to grant her prayer.'

I recall Goldwin Smith on this occasion not for his polemics but for his prophecy. He was convinced that Canadians possessed an incurably colonial mentality, and it was his conviction that they could not survive as an independent people. They would be compelled, he said, by the force of circumstances to end for better or for worse (and he thought for better) as part of a continental United States. Statesmanship being the constructive acceptance of the inevitable, Canadian statesmen, he thought, should not struggle against, but make friends of, destiny, and guide their people to their immense advantage into the great Union to the south. He failed to see that the Canada of his day had the seeds of nationhood within it. Happily there were contemporaries of Goldwin Smith with the gifts of imagination and faith, which in him failed to complement intellect. If Oxford is indeed 'the home of lost causes', she has to thank her Regius Professor of History of that time for his part in creating that reputation. For Goldwin Smith's cause was lost, his

prophecy confounded. Canadians *have* survived—as Canadians.

II

Material evidence of our survival is by now sufficiently familiar. A Canadian speaking to an English audience need no longer—fortunately no longer!—feel impelled to recite his lists of natural resources, his population statistics, his boasts of technical and industrial prowess, ending with his ritual peroration (spoken *fortissimo*): 'So I say to you, Gentlemen, *do not sell Canada short*!' But survival in a material sense is only the beginning of full nationhood. It is what we are doing with our resources by which we must be judged. Our eighteen million people, our gifts of nature, our productivity, our technology, these are largely wasted unless we make with them something distinctively Canadian in North America. One of our poets calls Canada

> A something possible,
> A chance . . .

and unless we exploit the possibility, unless we seize the chance, all the fish and the lumber, all the wheat and the oil, the iron ore and the chemicals, will have been ends in themselves, not means to the fulfilment of our nationhood.

What we are making of our 'something possible', our 'chance', it is better for others to say. We are not smugly satisfied that we are making the most of our opportunities—such complacency would itself give the lie to the assertion—but we feel we have laid foundations for further building. Our constitution has served us well. It is not a legacy from the eighteenth century; it is in many ways the most workable constitution in the Americas, one in which there has been a successful marriage between parliamentary government and a Federal system—a marriage, it is true, not showing unbroken happiness, but never encountering any serious risk of divorcement.

We have been successful in our manner of adjusting the relations of the varied communities making Canada their home. About one Canadian out of three speaks French as his mother tongue. His is no minority assimilated within a common Canadianism, but a senior partner sharing equally in the joint project of Confederation. Then there are the 'new Canadians', of whom some two millions from Great Britain and from Europe have reached our shores since 1945, distributing themselves in our cities and on our farms along that narrow ribbon of settlement which follows the common border. It would be easy, it is certainly tempting, to lessen the impact of American influence upon these new arrivals by exposing them to the fierce obliterating heat of the melting-pot. This treatment we reject. We try to fit in the new-comers much as they are, as pieces in the Canadian mosaic.

The plural society pays some penalty for its pluralism. Perhaps we are, as a consequence, rather more difficult to govern; perhaps we set out for ourselves areas of inhibition into which the politician walks warily and strays at his peril. (I could give you examples.) But we think it has been worth it. Certainly the tenacious and entirely natural quest of French-speaking Canada for *survivance*, for the preservation of its individuality, has made our country infinitely more interesting, enhancing the quality of government, enriching the arts, often giving colour to everyday life—as when we glance down a bilingual menu to find 'Deep apple pie: *tarte aux pommes profonde*.' Even in Goldwin Smith's day the diversity of Canadian life offered a welcome contrast to other areas of the continent, as he would have discovered soon enough had he ever ventured from his Toronto retreat to explore his chosen land whose prospects he so perversely underrated. We are told how in 1879 the city of Quebec, preparing for the official reception of a new governor-general, commissioned a composer to write a cantata of welcome:

> He was told to spare neither means nor effort for this grand occasion. Full of enthusiasm he set about writing the music and assembled nearly 300 musicians. . . . The climax of the cantata, to words by the poet Napoléon Legendre, was a simultaneous rendition of 'God Save The Queen', 'Vive la Canadienne' and 'Comin' Thro' the Rye'—a feat of contrapuntal composition which created a sensation.

Perhaps a more decisive test of national achievement is the emergence of national character. Can one speak of a Canadian character? I remember often when I represented Canada in Washington how American friends—always with the courteous intent so characteristic of them—would say: 'Why should there be a border between our two countries, when there is really no difference between us?' But we *are* different—each country being properly engaged in its own national experiment—and how important such differences are in a world increasingly threatened with a dull sameness!

History provides many differences between us. There are absent from our story two of the great forces shaping the character of so many modern nations, including that of the United States. For, unlike other North American peoples, we have never turned upon our Motherlands; nor have we turned upon ourselves. A nation embroiled in revolution or in civil war engages in a fierce emotional experience persisting long after the event. Colour and excitement enter the national tradition. So do hates, and hopes, and heroes. Out of them a sense of national identity is quickly and easily made. There is no doubt of our

deficiency in heroes. Just as we have fought no Revolutionary or Civil War, so we have no Washington or Franklin, no Lincoln or Lee on whose exploits to bring up our young. We need yield to no one in the daring of our explorers nor, I believe, in the quality of our statesmanship, but the attempt by one of our enterprising television producers to elevate the adventurer Pierre Radisson to the eminence of Davy Crockett was rather less than successful!

But the quiet life has its compensations, too. And I would place prominently among them the empirical, workaday approach to national and international problems which I think may fairly be identified as a characteristic Canadian contribution to the North American achievement. If revolutions breed heroes, they also breed doctrinaires, and that stern sense of self-righteousness which, if it sustains the weak, is not an unmixed blessing for the strong. Reflecting on our history, we do not believe that injuries to societies may be healed in the same fashion and with the same hope of success as a machine is repaired or an appendix removed. If Americans ‘fix’, and Britons ‘cope’, Canadians, it has been suggested, ‘adapt’. We are gardeners in the field of politics, not engineers. We are freer than some from the delusion that some swift and spectacular stroke may solve problems which can never be solved, only ameliorated.

Speakers have often talked about Canada’s role of interpreter between the two great English-speaking nations. Long before we had even commenced seriously to play such a part, Sir Winston Churchill flattered us by calling Canada the linchpin between Great Britain and the United States. A witty Canadian has recently offered a new metaphor: ‘Sometimes for us in Canada’, he says, ‘it seems as though the United States and the United Kingdom were cup and saucer, and Canada the spoon, for we are in and out of both with the greatest freedom and we are given most recognition when we are most a nuisance.’

I have mentioned qualities which are, perhaps, negative. But are they not essential to the effective diplomatist? And here I may say—without, I hope, any suggestion of smugness—that we have built up in recent years a department of government whose officials are serving us well in the relations we now formally maintain with nearly sixty sovereign states. The department resembles, in structure and training, your own Foreign Office; it has proved itself true to its model.

What I regard as our greatest achievement I have kept to the last, for this is my main theme—how we have become, and why we shall remain, the North American member of a Commonwealth of Nations.

III

The path from colony to nation in our own history is so well travelled and well known, that he who treads it does so not as a pioneer but merely as a sightseer. We need not dawdle on our way; but there are still familiar landmarks worth revisiting. Young as we are, we are the second oldest member of the Commonwealth. It has been Canada's good fortune to be a pathfinder in self-government and self-determination. The process has been one, for the most part, of orderly evolution. Within our boundaries, we have been taught the importance of tolerance by the influence of our own political and social pattern. We Canadians have been obliged to learn tolerance.

Those who, at the beginning of the present century, showed their enthusiasm for what was known as the 'imperial idea' nearly always, in our country, were thinking of relations between Canada and Britain, and sought to devise ways and means for achieving a single and united policy in foreign affairs. There were two main methods by which this goal was sought. No one could have been more high-minded in dealing with this problem than the members of the 'Round Table' group. But too many people refused to make a choice between the two alternatives presented as the Imperial dilemma—federation of the Empire on the one hand or its disintegration on the other. The dilemma was logical, but the Commonwealth has not been built on logic. The other approach to Empire was that followed by General Smuts and Sir Robert Borden. It would have led to a single imperial policy achieved through the voluntary co-operation of autonomous communities. This ideal was more attractive than that of imperial federation at Westminster, and it took longer to die, but it eventually expired because members of the Commonwealth did not, in fact, see eye to eye on even basic questions of foreign policy.

Canadians, in their relations with the British Commonwealth during the years between the wars, were mainly preoccupied with the attempt to achieve dominion status. It gave rise to a long argument. It is possible, and was at one time fashionable in Canada, to portray this as a struggle between 'forces of light', to be found in certain circles in Ottawa, and the 'powers of darkness' residing in Downing Street and Whitehall. To serious students of the subject, this interpretation of the issue has long since been much less history than myth. If the development of dominion status was so very largely a process of niggling argument and the 'everlasting no', this was probably a necessary negation in the imperial dialectic. We found in Canada, as 'an *independent* nation', what the newly *independent* nations of our own day will find (if they have not done so). They will discover that there is a difference, as Lord Balfour wisely pointed out in 1926, between 'status' and 'stature', and that

while the first may, in international affairs, be a necessary pre-condition of the second, the second does not necessarily follow from the first.

IV

The attitudes of Canadians towards the Commonwealth today are very different from those prevailing between the Wars, and the difference has become more and more evident since 1947, which might be regarded as marking the birth of the multi-racial Commonwealth, when power was transferred to the two new States on the Indian subcontinent. There are a number of reasons for this fresh and, as will be seen, more sympathetic appraisal.

North America for the most part possesses a common language. Communications in all forms from our neighbours reach people living north of the border almost as easily as those on the other side of it. Much has been said of late about the ownership in the United States of so much of our industry, of the control in the same hands of a large proportion of our mineral wealth; but influence from beyond the frontier is less pervasive in the economic field than in that which is concerned with the intangibles. This presents a subtle and persistent problem about which Canadians have become increasingly apprehensive. Was Goldwin Smith going to be proved right after so many years? Was continental union inevitable? Many Canadians, fearful, perhaps unjustly fearful, of the winds that blow from the south, have looked to the Commonwealth association as a countervailing force against an erosion of our sense of national identity. This took the form, on the part of those who had always had an affection for their kinsmen in the British Isles, of an even warmer feeling. But there is a still more interesting development—the sense of strong attachment to the ideals of the Commonwealth, association on the part of those Canadians who, during the argument over national status, were suspicious of the imperial connexion—ardent Canadian nationalists of the 1930's active on the western prairies, and some of the intellectuals of French Canada.

But Canadians have become attracted by the Commonwealth ideal for reasons more constructive than the desire to escape from the influence of the United States. We have come to regard the Commonwealth as a grouping of friendly nations making widely differing responses to the Cold War, thus cutting across the frozen configuration of international politics. Also, we are nations which are accustomed to consult one another and, in our individual responses, to have regard for the interests of the whole. If the countries in such a group, embracing on the one hand two members of the Atlantic Pact and on

the other the chief exponents of Afro-Asian neutralism, might draw still closer in a spirit of mutual concern, here was the beginning of a bridge in a world where nearly all the bridges had been blown. Against a background not only of political conflict but of racial strife, the ideal of a multi-racial Commonwealth offers, hopefully, an object lesson in tolerance and understanding between white and non-white peoples. Canadians in all walks of life are attracted by this aspect of the Commonwealth, even if they know (or should know) that in practice the ideal has been sadly tarnished.

Since the inauguration of the Colombo Plan in 1950, the Commonwealth is proving its worth as an instrument for distributing the wealth of its nations in the form of technical and capital assistance more equitably between the so-called 'developed' and 'developing' communities of the world. The relationship between donor and recipient is often unhappy and always difficult. The Commonwealth relationship, as it appears to us, has done much, and it may do much more, to keep the resulting tension within reasonable bounds.

These new aspects of the Commonwealth association have combined to produce among Canadians an attitude unlike any known before. Resentment, indifference, passive acceptance, perfunctory acknowledgement, have given way to something which is almost a proprietary interest. This is not to be misunderstood. No one, of course, questions Britain's place as the senior partner of the new association. Apart from many obvious reasons, there is much too great an admiration in our country for the way in which the British people and their leaders have gone about their task of what might be called creative abdication. The Commonwealth is changing so rapidly as even to outpace the efforts of the cartographer. Its past history will, for most of us, never lose its appeal; its lustre will not fade. But greater even than the achievement of creating the old British Empire, whether through 'absence of mind' or by design, is the supreme feat of its orderly dissolution in the new Commonwealth, with an absolute minimum of violence and rancour. History records nothing remotely resembling it. The solid diadem of Empire has been quietly replaced by a loosely strung necklace of independent nations. This process of honourable liquidation certainly does not suffer by comparison with the hasty retreats and over-staying of welcomes displayed by other colonial powers.

Canadian opinion, then, reveals no wish to displace others as leaders in the Commonwealth nor a desire to intrude, but only a readiness to share in the solution of problems once thought of as entirely colonial in nature, and now worthy of Commonwealth interest. Old inhibitions have disappeared. Canadian governments have now permitted citizens of our country to serve on bodies

dealing with colonial or Commonwealth problems: a Canadian was named as a member of the Constitutional Commission for Malaya; another was appointed to the Monckton Commission which reported on the Central African Federation. Still another has recently assumed command of a British division; a Canadian Brigade was part of the Commonwealth Division in the Korean War (and here may I say that we are told by its officers that this formation, drawn from widely scattered and very diverse countries of the Commonwealth, revealed a striking solidarity of feeling among those who served in it. When men, from whatever continent they may come, choose to spend their leave together, there must be a very real bond between them).

So we, in Canada, share a general sense of concern when one Commonwealth member transgresses what has come to be understood as the unwritten code of the association: as when the domestic policies of a member too flagrantly conflict with what we know to be enduring principles of human rights, whether or not they are written into a constitution; as when two of its members come close to open conflict over a dispute between them; as when we fail to remember the unwritten rule of consultation before commitment, so as not to place other members of the association in a difficult position in matters of foreign policy.

Canadians, then, have come to think of the Commonwealth as their Commonwealth. They do not, of course, claim any special proprietary interest. Still less do they resent interest on the part of other members, whether settler countries or Afro-Asian members, whether realms or republics. Just as we have come to accept the principle of the ‘divisibility of the Crown’ for constitutional purposes, so the time has come for understanding what is meant by the ‘divisibility of the Commonwealth’, for its new and varied political purposes.

V

We have been dealing with perspectives. What are the prospects? What are the pressing problems of the contemporary Commonwealth, with which Canadians, in keeping with their proprietary interest, have come to be as deeply concerned as any other member?

There is the persistent problem of reconciling the traditional principle of non-interference by one member in the affairs of another, with something else —with the sense of concern each member ought to feel when the prestige of their common association is threatened and, with it, its character as an exemplar of decent and civilized international behaviour.

The Commonwealth, for the first time, met with this issue last March in a

pressing and insistent form, and no evasion was possible. The policy of one member *did* threaten the prestige of our family of nations. The only possible course of action was followed. I know not all are satisfied by the outcome. For our Commonwealth, the loss of the land of Botha and of Smuts has left a sense of sadness. But it is an index of our civility that there has been no gloating, only a feeling of compassion and hope. What happened had to happen. Racial policy is no mere matter of domestic concern. What John Donne said of a man is true of a nation. It is 'involved in Mankinde'.

Another great problem which the Commonwealth must face will arise as new states—many new states—of increasingly diverse backgrounds and traditions, are admitted to membership. If I may draw on my personal experience, I have very happy recollections of the meetings which we four High Commissioners—from New Zealand and Australia, from South Africa and Canada—held with the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and two or three others, almost daily during the course of the Second World War. These informal, unrecorded, intimate—one could almost say 'cosy'—sessions were proof of the family relationship between Britain and the old Dominions. What will happen to the Commonwealth when its members increase to eighteen, twenty, or even more? How can the family atmosphere be preserved?

I do not pretend to know the answers to these questions, which will tax the imagination and resourcefulness of Commonwealth statesmen for a long time to come. But it is not too early to put our collective intelligence to work to devise solutions as best we can, and I rejoice that among the first to give the problem the benefit of their attention have been newer members of our association. I was much interested in the fruitful suggestions of the Prime Minister of Malaya. I should like to comment, if I may, on one of them. The Tunku expressed his concern that, as he put it, 'unless the principle is accepted of agreement by majority there is a danger that the present loosely knit association may become a farce, degenerating into a coffee-house discussion'.

Now, with the greatest respect, I submit that the concept of 'a coffee-house Commonwealth' (if I may use the expression) is nothing of which we need be fearful, still less ashamed. The coffee-house, at its best, was an admirable institution, as an English poet reminds us:

> To some coffee-house I stray
> For news, the manna of a day. . . .

It was a centre for imparting and acquiring information, for exchanging views, for trading ideas; and all this in an atmosphere of friendliness and freedom. If the meetings of the representatives of our Commonwealth—not only of Prime Ministers but in less exalted gatherings—continue to reflect the qualities of the

coffee-house—or, if you like, of the common-room—we shall have, it seems to me, an incomparable agency for intellectual mutual aid. The High Commissioner for Ceylon in London has observed that Commonwealth members 'are perfectly free to argue and to dispute and to hold to their own individual opinions'. Canadians have found this true throughout their long membership and may draw on that experience to support the High Commissioner's view that 'it is the informality of the club atmosphere that makes membership in the Commonwealth both pleasant and so productive of results'.

The real danger, it seems to me, is not that of 'a coffee-house Commonwealth', but the risk that through scepticism, scorn, or suspicion we may allow this priceless setting for the free exchange of opinion to gather dust and cobwebs, and eventually to vanish. That would be a major tragedy. We must not let it happen.

Another problem is raised by the disappearance of the life of learning which Commonwealth leaders used to share. It has even been said, 'Oxford has held the Commonwealth together.' (I apologize for this note of complacency.) But will our solidarity be weakened as, in future, more of our leaders attend, as they will, as they must, their own institutions, receiving instruction in their own languages? This is not so much a development to be regretted as one to be reckoned with. The older members of the Commonwealth can help, as they have helped, by getting the institutions of higher learning in the new nations off to the best possible start. On Canadian initiative, for example, an extensive scholarship scheme, now in full operation, is bringing 200 scholars from all parts of the Commonwealth to study in Canada in the coming academic year. The numbers will increase.

A major problem is presented by the disappearance, in some cases, from the Commonwealth of the parliamentary institutions which were once a distinguishing feature of all its members. This eclipse may be temporary or permanent. The unifying force of the parliamentary system has been of immeasurable importance. It has provided a common fund of political ideas and, as one was always aware at Commonwealth meetings, it has given its members a common political language. The daring experiment of planting British representative institutions where J. S. Mill, for one, claimed they could not thrive, has not been uniformly successful. If the promise has been brilliantly fulfilled in the Lok Sabha (the Indian House of the People), there are other nations where the parliamentary system is but imperfectly understood and indeed just did not work. One would like to think that in communities whose leaders have been trained in the art of parliamentary government it will survive; but, should it not, we must come to accept and may even come to

profit by a Commonwealth composed of diverse forms of government, as we have accepted and profited by a Commonwealth composed of diverse peoples.

VI

All the realms and the republics within the bounds of the Commonwealth recognize the Sovereign as its Head; some as a Constitutional Monarch. I have been asked if, during my travels in Canada, I discovered any difference between various communities in their attitude towards the Crown and Great Britain. I have said that the question ought not to be one, but two. As far as the Crown is concerned, all through Canada it commands true respect, inspires profound belief in what it stands for, and arouses warm affection for the person who wears it. That is true of Canadians wherever they live, and here, perhaps, I may say that the new-comers quickly learn to appreciate the meaning of the Monarchy in our national life. On the occasion of royal tours in Canada, touching tributes are always paid to the visitors by members of what are rather inelegantly called ‘ethnic groups’.

There are some people in Canada with strong nationalist feelings who think that their end could only be achieved through a republican form of government. There are, happily, very few persons with such views, and they are profoundly misguided in labouring under the delusion that as a republic we could remain an independent nation. We could not. The Crown-in-Parliament is the supreme symbol of our nationhood and our greatest defence against absorption into a continental state.

Our feeling for the Monarchy is marked everywhere by warmth and devotion, but our attitude to Great Britain, naturally, differs with the backgrounds of the Canadians concerned, and their knowledge of the people of the United Kingdom. Persons of British ancestry must think differently from those of other origins and who know nothing of life in the British Isles. These cannot share the strong feeling for Great Britain and the deep sentiment with which the thoughts of so many of us are charged; but that does not keep the newer Canadians from having a deep respect for British traditions. Stephen Leacock in writing of them once observed, ‘Leave them alone and pretty soon the Ukrainians will think they won the battle of Trafalgar!’

Great Britain is separated from us by an ocean. The Crown is not separated from us at all, because the Crown belongs to us, as it does to the people of England, or Australia, or Nigeria. The words ‘Queen of Canada’ do not come from the world of romance. The phrase stands for a constitutional reality, and when Her Majesty, in a speech made in Ottawa in 1957, said that she was going to visit the United States as ‘Queen of Canada’, she expressed a truth

profoundly important to us and of deep significance to the Commonwealth of which she is Head.

The benign role of the Crown has been superbly illuminated by the Queen's recent tours in India and Pakistan, where new Republics replace the older Raj. Not only did the Sovereign visit these States at their invitation, but, through an inspired constitutional paradox, took part in the celebrations of the birthday of republican institutions in India. Vast crowds received her with a tumultuous welcome, often exhibiting, by way of tribute, symbols of the former British rule. What is comparable beyond our Commonwealth?

The Crown gives to government a personal quality which mellows and humanizes it. When convicts are released in Canada, under a royal amnesty, there are often expressions from them of gratitude to the Sovereign. Lawyers would tell them that such an act of clemency is a governmental action, but governments under our system, as we know, act in the name of the Sovereign. Our allegiance is not to a document, nor to the design on a piece of bunting, but to a person.

The ultimate aims of the members of our association are the same as those of most nations—a profound desire for peace, security, and justice. However, by a strange—and we think happy—accident, history has thrown together men of many races and tongues in a grouping of states where the blending of law with liberty is represented by a supreme uniting symbol. The Crown stands for all that is best in us. Its aura transcends even the boundaries of the Commonwealth itself. The world is aware of it. There exists today no human institution whose influence for good surpasses that of the Monarchy we cherish.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[End of *Canadians and Their Commonwealth* by Vincent Massey]