

## Notes of the Month

# COMMONWEALTH? EMPIRE?

Some people seem to think that relinquishing an Empire has turned the Army into a stay-at-home force. Not a bit of it. The only overseas station lost to the Army is India. In Cyprus, Aden, Malaysia, British Guiana and Kenya many more troops are now stationed than before the War.

*Current Army Recruiting Poster.*

May 17, 1965

June will see the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference. June will also see, immediately after, the Afro-Asian States' Conference in Algiers. The former will comprise twenty-one states (seventeen Afro-Asian-Caribbean), covering one-quarter of the population of the world, or roughly the same proportion as the old Empire. The latter is expected to include delegations of some seventy states, covering the majority of the population of the world. Many of the representatives at the former gathering will travel on to the latter. May has already seen the meeting of certain other combinations. The South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, comprising five Western imperialist powers and three Asian states, met in London. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, consisting solely of Western imperialist powers, and excluding African, Asian or Latin American representatives, also met in London. Whatever the varied character and composition of these different gatherings, the same central problems have monopolised and continue to monopolise the attention of all. War in Vietnam. War in the Dominican Republic. Wars in Malaysia and Southern Arabia. Wars of Western armed mercenaries in the Congo. Together with the problems of racialism maintained by armed violence in Rhodesia and South Africa (not to mention the Southern United States). All problems of colonialism, colonial wars and racialism.

## **New and Old Colonialism**

Not just the new strategy and techniques of imperialism to penetrate and undermine the newly independent states—the new strategy and techniques for which the Editor of this journal ventured very diffidently nine years ago to suggest the coinage of the term 'Neo-Colonialism', and was amazed to see how rapidly the term passed into general use during the subsequent years until by now learned

books are written to speculate vainly on its origin. Today it is necessary to awaken public opinion, bemused into a self-congratulatory haze by the marvellous advance of newly independent states, to face the realities of the modern world. The Old Colonialism is not yet dead. The Old Colonialism is still very much alive and kicking with the utmost viciousness. Direct old-style colonial wars, 'gunboat diplomacy', armed aggression and invasion of other people's countries, to overthrow popularly elected governments or suppress national liberation movements and subjugate foreign peoples. Colonial wars at this moment are the centre of the modern international situation.

### **Labour and Empire**

When the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference meets, we may certainly expect to hear, especially from that master of unctuous platitudes, Mr. Harold Wilson, paeans of self-praise on the wonderful way in which Labour 'gave freedom' to the Empire and replaced the old Tory Empire of colonial subjection by the new Commonwealth of Free Nations. Certainly the victories of the national liberation revolt of the majority of the subject peoples of the old West European colonial empires are among the greatest revolutionary achievements of the modern world—even though the independence from imperialism has still in many cases to be fully completed. But let us maintain a sense of proportion on who won the victories. President Nkrumah was imprisoned by a Labour Government before his state was 'given' independence by a Tory Government. However much the term may be anathema now, nowhere was the cult of Empire sung more loudly than by the leaders of Labour. It was not only the old J. H. Thomas who between the wars proclaimed 'We love our Empire', and subsequently joined the Tories. It was Herbert Morrison who, as a principal spokesman of the 1945 Labour Government, proclaimed in January 1946: 'We are great friends of the jolly old Empire and we mean to stick to it'.

### **Who Won Freedom?**

It was Ernest Bevin who as Foreign Secretary proclaimed in parliament on February 21, 1946:

I am not prepared to sacrifice the British Empire, because I know that if the British Empire fell . . . it would mean the standard of life of our constituents would fall considerably.

That characteristic proclamation of the gospel of Labour Imperial-

ism happened to be made in the very month of the great Indian Naval Rising of February 1946, when the entire Indian Navy ran up the Red Flag alongside the flags of the national liberation movement; when the British Commander-in-Chief threatened to blow them out of the water; when the Bombay working class came out on strike in response to the call of the Naval Strike Committee in the ships lying off the waters in Bombay, and 250 were shot dead, according to the British official figures, on the streets of Bombay during the three days February 21-23 (the very moment of Bevin's speech); and when Premier Attlee got up in parliament, immediately after the news of the Indian Naval Rising to announce a new angle of vision in relation to India and the dispatch of the Cripps Mission, and the tortuous negotiations with the upper national leaders began, which ended in the recognition of the independence of India. When Mr. Shastri and Mr. Wilson exchange their mutual compliments, they will do well not to forget entirely the masses of the people of India, who have still to speak their final word, or the thousand Indian communist and popular leaders imprisoned without trial, or the Lion of Kashmir, historic hero of the Indian national liberation struggle, now detained and forbidden access to his own people.

### **True to Type**

Lenin long ago showed that the basis of Labour Imperialism, of what used to be called reformism, of the modern opportunist type of Social-Democracy in the twentieth century, and of its domination of the labour movement in the Western imperialist countries, was colonial exploitation and the corruption of sharing in the spoils of colonial exploitation and assisting to maintain it. Ernest Bevin's famous proclamation of 1946, cited above, was only spelling out Lenin's thesis in popular language. When, therefore, at the present day Mr. Wilson, Mr. Stewart, Mr. Healey or Mr. Gordon Walker proclaim their fervent support for the armed action of the United States in Vietnam or Santo Domingo, or for the military rôle of Britain in Malaysia or Southern Arabia, and the absolute necessity to increase, at whatever cost, Britain's military expenditure to record heights in order to sustain this rôle, this attitude and policy should not have taken the mass of the labour movement by surprise, as if it were some startling and inexplicable departure from traditional official Labour principles, although in fact it has caused such indignant surprise. They are running true to type.

## **Towards the Break with Imperialism**

What is new and positive and of the greatest importance for the future is the strength of the opposition which this policy has aroused, especially against the war in Vietnam, among the broadest sections of the trade union and labour movement. When Lenin showed long ago the ruinous costs and bankruptcy of this type of opportunist calculation of the short-term advantage of a section at the expense of the basic long-term interests of the whole class, today experience is bringing this home to ever wider sections, as the unparalleled costs of military and colonialist adventures frustrate social advance, and impose increasing taxation, rising prices and policies of wage restraint. Thus, as Lenin foretold, the conditions are gathering for a new phase of the labour movement, breaking with the old basis of imperialism.

## **The Colonial Office That Never Was**

When the Labour Government came into office in 1945, the ambitious Empire-minded Ministers embarked on a grandiose scheme, launched in 1946, to construct a gigantic new Colonial Office on a site opposite Westminster Abbey. It is one of the revealing projects less often recalled today by the pious chroniclers of that Labour Government. For this purpose they acquired the site formerly occupied by the Westminster Hospital and the old Stationery Office, facing Central Hall to the west and Westminster Abbey to the south, there to begin constructing in suitably historic surroundings the mighty headquarters of the greatest colonial empire the world had ever seen. Alas for the vanity of human wishes. Before the gigantic new Colonial Office building could be completed, the greater part of the colonial empire had crumbled away. Ten years later, in 1956, a House of Commons Select Committee described ruefully 'the unhappy history' of the whole scheme, and recommended abandonment. In 1958 the decision to abandon the project was finally taken by a Tory Government, after a cost of one million pounds:

The Government have now decided that the greater part of the site shall not be built on at all, and a quite modest office block will be built on what remains. Accommodation for the Colonial Office is to be arranged elsewhere. . . . Total expenditure on a scheme that has now proved abortive will be at least £1 million.

*(The Times, November 20, 1958.)*

So ends the parable of Labour's Crumbling Dream of Empire.

## The New Taboo

So the once holy term 'Empire', beloved equally of Tory and Labour acolytes, has now become the forbidden word.

Oh no! we never mention her,  
Her name is never heard;  
My lips are now forbid to speak  
That once familiar word.

The transition proved a little awkward. Until the first world war the official title was 'The British Empire'; the King was the 'King Emperor'; even the self-governing White Dominions were collectively referred to as 'The Colonies': and the conferences with their Premiers were termed originally 'Colonial Conferences', later 'Imperial Conferences'. After the White Dominions had won effective independence by the 1926 Conference and the Statute of Westminster of 1931, the term 'Commonwealth' began to be used to describe the association of Britain and the White Dominions, although in legal usage the term was defined to cover the entire range of 'Britain and the British Dominions Overseas', including equally the White self-governing Dominions and the subject Empire of India and the crown colonies and protectorates, comprising seven-eighths of the whole. Thus the hybrid term 'Commonwealth and Empire' began to be used as a supposed description of the two sections, the self-governing section and the subject section. In this way the Official Handbook issued by the British Government in 1946 was entitled 'Handbook on the British Commonwealth and Empire'. Since 1959 the latest version of the official Handbook has become 'The Commonwealth in Brief'. Even 'British' has gone.

## Some Last Redoubts

Of course there have been some lingering pockets of resistance. In vain the oracle of wisdom on imperial constitutional law, Professor W. I. Jennings, joint author of *The Constitutional Law of the British Empire*, tipped the wink to innocently perturbed Top People in *The Times* on June 6, 1949:

Empire was associated with 'imperialism' which was the deadliest of all political sins. The use of 'Commonwealth' made political conditions slightly less difficult.

In that same year Premier Attlee sought to reassure the House of Commons on May 2 in an official statement on behalf of the Government that the three terms, 'The Commonwealth', 'the British Commonwealth' or 'the British Empire', should be regarded as

interchangeable and equally valid: 'there has been no agreement to adopt or to exclude the use of any one of these terms'. As late as 1952 *The Times* could still lament in a last ditch editorial on January 15 of that year:

The extension of the term Commonwealth . . . has blurred the edge of meaning. . . . It would be more than a pity if the name of Empire were to be driven out.

Those gallant last hopes were vain. The thin red line went down. By 1960 even that ultimate stronghold of traditional Conservatism, the Primrose League (founded under the patronage of Disraeli, who first introduced the term 'Empire' into official British usage), formally deleted the term 'The Empire' from its title and substituted 'The Commonwealth'. All that remains now, still unyielding, are the decorations invented by Lloyd George, the C.B.E., O.B.E. and M.B.E. The 'British Empire' may have vanished, but the 'Commanders of the British Empire' remain. They have not yet followed the example of the Primrose League to transform themselves into 'Commanders of the Commonwealth'.

### **Still the Largest Colonial Empire**

Nomenclature, however, should not blind us to realities. It is true that since the second world war and the victory of the peoples over fascism the overwhelming majority of the former subject peoples of the Empire have won the establishment of sovereign independent states. The form and degree of independence may vary. In some cases it may still be heavily limited and cover continued British military occupation, as in Malaysia or Cyprus. In all cases it still covers continued economic penetration and exploitation. Nevertheless, this achievement of independent statehood is a tremendous achievement of the national liberation struggle, and opens the way for further advance. The conditions of the liberation struggle against imperialism have thus profoundly changed in character for this more than nineteen-twentieths majority of the former subject colonial peoples under British rule. But this should not lead to ignoring the significance of the situation of the remaining fifteen millions still under autocratic British colonial rule. In conventional official discussion these are commonly treated as a fragmentary minority, either on the way to independence, or too small to be 'viable' as states. This cavalier treatment is misleading. For an examination of their range will show that they are the key points of what is still, even in this limited sense of direct colonial rule, the

world's largest remaining direct colonial empire. Also in this era of the near approaching end of colonialism Britain remains the biggest colonial power in the world, with possessions in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania and Europe.

### **Focal Points of World Strategic Domination**

These possessions include in Africa the storm centre of Rhodesia and the protectorates in South Africa; in the Southern Indian Ocean Mauritius (where a state of emergency has just been proclaimed by the Governor, and Guards have been flown in from Aden), the Seychelles and the Maldivé Islands; in the Southern Atlantic St. Helena, Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha; in the Mediterranean Gibraltar; in the Middle East Aden and in practice the protected sultanates of Southern Arabia and the Gulf; in the Far East Hong Kong; in Oceania a chain of islands; on the American continent Guiana and Honduras and at the tip of South America the Falkland Islands. Not large in terms of aggregate population. Some fifteen millions. But a survey of their positions on the globe will sufficiently show that they represent a range of key military-strategic positions spread across the world, and the framework of Mr. Wilson's policy picturesquely described as to be 'strong East of Suez'. It is here that arise the continuing forms of direct conflict with colonialism, colonial repression and colonial wars, the 'trouble spots', as in Aden or Guiana, or also, if we recognise that in fact Singapore and the nuclear bases in Cyprus are parts of the same strategic chain, in Malaysia or Cyprus. The anti-imperialist, in considering the problems of neo-colonialism in relation to the newly independent states, will be wise not to ignore the significance of the still continuing direct colonial empire and the vital importance of the independence of these peoples still to be won.

### **Mystique of the Commonwealth?**

What of the newly independent states, with an aggregate population of 650 millions, whose Premiers will meet with the Premiers of Britain and the older White Dominions, representing an aggregate population of 85 million, in the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference. Seventeen of the twenty-one states are African, Asian or Caribbean. What link still holds this very varied and disparate assemblage together? Have we here a kind of ghostly survival of the old Empire, like the Holy Roman Empire lingering for centuries on the fragmented ruins of the old realm of Rome or Charlemagne? Certainly

the professed spiritual or mystical links have grown thin. The Queen? Six of the twenty-one states are Republics. Parliamentary political institutions? Pakistan is a military dictatorship, while Ghana has established by popular plebiscite a one party state, and the majority of the other component African states have moved or are moving to this political form to express popular national unity and bar the way to imperialist disruption. A common foreign policy? Some are non-aligned; others are at the heart of imperialist military blocs. Some are imperialist; others are engaged in the struggle against imperialism.

### **Link of the Commonwealth**

The real link of the Commonwealth is nothing so mysterious or metaphysical or spiritual. The real link is in essence what has always been the link of Empire in the modern era of imperialism: the rôle of British finance-capital. The sphere of the Commonwealth, together with the sterling area, represents the main overseas sphere of British finance-capital. A Board of Trade survey of net overseas investments of British companies (excluding oil, banking and insurance) at the end of 1962 showed 75 per cent to be in the Commonwealth or sterling area, as against 10.6 per cent in Western Europe or 9 per cent in the United States (*Board of Trade Journal*, November 5, 1963). This sphere of the Commonwealth and the sterling area represents the countries in which British capital is the predominant investor or foreign owner of resources, although in practice faced with increasing competition, especially from United States capitalist interests. Some slight remains of the imperial preference trading advantages still continue for Commonwealth countries in the British market. Special financial facilities are also available for Commonwealth countries to raise capital on more favourable terms in London. In addition, the periodical Premier's Conference provides a forum without obligations, an opportunity for diplomatic interchanges, and a channel for the still relatively weak Afro-Asian states involved to exercise a certain pressure on the imperialist states or obtain concessions in return for not bringing issues to too sharp a clash.

### **Inescapable Divergences**

Inevitably the differences at this gathering of what now comprises four imperialist states and seventeen Afro-Asian-Caribbean states come increasingly to the forefront. Each successive Commonwealth



Conference during recent years has shown the growing contradictions. The 1961 Conference led to the formal withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth, although Britain strove to the last to prevent this, and approved this solution only after it had become clear that otherwise the majority of the Premiers present would have carried a decision for the exclusion of South Africa on account of its apartheid policy. It should be noted that this separation has so far been largely formal, and that the special imperial preferential trading advantages have been continued. The 1962 Conference met under the dark shadow of Britain's approach to join the Common Market, with the consequent prospect of putting up barriers against the entry of Commonwealth producers into the British market in favour of West European producers. Although Britain's attempt to join the Common Market was ignominiously rebuffed by the end of 1962, the blow to the economic links between Britain and the Commonwealth countries, and the distrust with regard to future prospects, has had lasting effects. The 1964 Conference was dominated by the question of the Rhodesian system of White racialist supremacy, after the African national movement had compelled the dissolution of the hated Central African Federation. This question of Rhodesia reaches an even sharper point at this year's conference. At the same time other questions press to the forefront, including the betrayal of the people of Guiana; relations with South Africa; the armed intervention in Congo; Aden and Malaysia; and the central international questions of the American wars against the people of Vietnam and of the Dominican Republic.

### **Tory Division over the Commonwealth**

It is no matter for surprise that in face of this highly disparate character of the present composition of the Commonwealth Conference, the non-White majority and the visibly sharpening contradictions, an increasing and influential section of Tory opinion, previously the most ardent upholders of the sacred flame of Empire as the central emblem of their faith, should now have begun to display marked coolness towards the Commonwealth, and even to question the desirability of its continuance. *The Times*, which in 1952 had lamented over the prospect of the demise of the beloved term 'Empire', on April 2, 1964, created some sensation by publishing prominently a feature article by 'A Conservative' which denounced the Commonwealth as 'a gigantic farce . . . the Commonwealth pretence does Britain harm.' In the ensuing controversy the

*Economist* on June 6, 1964, gloomily pointed out that 'it may prove harder to bring to an end the Commonwealth than to preserve it . . . we may be stuck with it.' These were characteristic voices of the advocates of close association of Britain with Western Europe as a more profitable alternative than the dwindling sphere of the Commonwealth. Other sections, however, and still the dominant sections of the imperialists point out, as noted by the *Economist* in the same article, the importance of the Commonwealth as a 'bridge between races, between the new and the old nations, between the rich and the poor nations'. While doubts about the Commonwealth have thus spread in Tory circles, the Labour Party seeks to emphasise its rôle of foremost champion of the Commonwealth as the supposed embodiment of a new type of relationship free from imperialism. 'The Labour Party,' noted the article by 'A Conservative' in *The Times* 'has become the party of the Commonwealth.' But even here there is a conspicuous difference between the prospectus and the practice.

### **Queen's Speech and Mr. Wilson's Practice**

That traditional prospectus and the Labour Government's policy, the Queen's Speech prepared for the royal lips to pronounce at the beginning of its term of office, proclaimed with regard to the Commonwealth:

My Ministers will have a special regard to the unique rôle of the Commonwealth, which itself reflects so many of the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. They will foster the Commonwealth connection on a basis of racial equality and close consultation between member governments, and will promote Commonwealth co-operation in trade, economic development, educational, scientific and cultural contacts and in other ways.

If we turn from these benevolent promises to the realm of practice we enter a different sphere. 'Close consultation between member Governments.' Really? Where was the consultation on the 15 per cent surcharge on imports? The surcharge struck a blow at the trade of all the Commonwealth countries. It provoked loud yelps of pain and expressions of indignation from Commonwealth statesmen that they had not been consulted. There was no consultation on the raising of the Bank Rate to 7 per cent, although this was equally a matter of very great concern to all the members of the sterling area. It might be objected that such vital financial decisions, requiring prior secrecy and instant speed of execution could not be subjected to the processes of consultation. Precisely. Consultation on everything except the really important decisions most vitally affect-

ing the Commonwealth countries. Or take the no less grave military and strategic fields. Where was the consultation over the decision to provide the British base of Ascension Island for the use of the Belgian paratroopers in order from this British base to make their armed descent into the Congo against the national liberation movement? Obviously once again consultation would have been highly impracticable, since many and probably the majority of the Commonwealth states of Africa would have raised strong objections. Thus the gulf between the initial benevolent professions of the Labour Government in relation to the Commonwealth and the actual colonialist practice has been brought into glaring prominence by recent events.

### **Lessons of Seato and Nato Meetings**

These contradictions revealed themselves also in a different context and corresponding special forms in the Seato and Nato meetings which took place in London during May. The South East Asia Treaty Organisation was originally established in 1954 (the year of the collapse of French colonialism in Vietnam, and of the ensuing Geneva Treaty which guaranteed the independence of Vietnam and freedom from foreign military occupation, but which the United States refused to sign). The supposed object was the defence of South-East Asia. But of the eight states composing it five were non-Asian imperialist powers. Only three Asian states could be scraped up, all satellites of the United States at that time, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines. But at this 1965 meeting Pakistan came out with open opposition to the United States war in Vietnam, and compelled the insertion of a dissenting paragraph in the communiqué. The Nato gathering consisted only of West European and North American imperialist and associated powers, with no Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans to cause trouble. But here also the battle could not be concealed. The revolt against the shameful American war in Vietnam and Dominican intervention found open expression, with only Britain fulfilling the contemptible role of the docile stooge in return for American support for its war on Malaysia. In the long struggle over the communiqué the United States strove to the last to get, if not support, at any rate some hint of absolution or sympathy. In vain. The final formula ran:

The Ministers reviewed comprehensively the international situation with particular attention to areas of tension or conflict such as Malaysia, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic and some African states, where grave threats

have arisen to international security and peace. They reaffirmed the right of all peoples to live at peace under governments of their own free choice. Thus a stage has been reached where it is being found difficult to mobilise even Nato for the aims of imperialism.

### **Warning of the Local Elections**

This advance of the fight in the international field against the offensive of imperialism, demonstrated in Vietnam, Malaysia, Santo Domingo or the Congo, is of especial significance for Britain and the internal political situation in Britain. The strength and range of the popular anger and campaign against the war in Vietnam, reaching the widest extent since the election last autumn, is a positive and healthy sign in British political development. Not since Suez, when the power of the popular campaign reaching throughout the labour movement finally compelled Gaitskell to change over from support of Eden's military action to opposition, has there been so wide a response. It is significant that this political stirring has developed most powerfully, not just over some home issue in isolation—and there have been plenty to arouse feeling—but over an international political issue embodying the fight against imperialism and war. There is revealed here, not only a response to internationalism, but at the same time the increasing recognition that this military imperialist policy abroad is bound up with Britain's problems at home. The local elections voting and abstentions have given a grave warning of the cost of this policy of war and military aggression abroad and consequent hardships and increased burdens for the people at home to pay for the military adventures. It is urgent to intensify the fight of the left in every field (and the example of the initial—but only initial—scotching of the Wilson-Brown try-out for a let-down on steel has shown what can be done) in order to prevent repetition of 1951 and rally the confidence of the people to go forward for the fulfilment of the aims for which they voted when they turned out the Tories eight months ago. The unity of the fight on the international field and the home field is demonstrated by all that is happening today.

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