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Class A.
"Britain's role in European and world affairs is at once strengthened and weakened by her Commonwealths". Discuss.

"If we could first know where we are and whether we are going, we could better judge what to do and how to do it.... Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall come alike fruitful in all the States... The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail - if we stand firm, we shall not fail".

(Anonymous, June 16th, 1858.)

When the German armies reached the Atlantic the power of Britain was at stake, for the time being. It told the frontier between civilization and barbarism - between lands living under the rule of law and lands where brute force was supreme. But, at any rate initially, for the resistance of the peoples of the British Commonwealth at home and overseas Hitler would have established this "New Order" inaugurating a fresh Dark Age for Europe and perhaps for the world as a whole. Since those days even, the Commonwealth has developed and proved in
many instances the reality behind that rather backhanded phrase "the family of nations" working for the general "welfare" or good as it was once envisaged is considered
impassionately this community rests on an extremely
imbalanced basis, almost defying analysis and definition. Thus
there are two opposing commentaries generally placed
upon the British Commonwealth; on the one hand it is
viewed as a rambling mass of diverse lands held together by
the nebulous link of individual self-interest and little
likely to survive any real onslaught on its foundations.
On the other hand it is considered a great, unifying, expanding
body working for the amelioration of mankind and the
perpetuation of peace. Great Britain stands at the central
position of the Commonwealth as the original member
country and the imperialist power formerly " owning " the
present dominion states, although it is significant that the
term the "British Commonwealth" is being gradually
superseded by that of Commonwealth. What is the secret of
the capacity of this to survive and to thrive? The full
implications of the present day importance of the Commonwealth
both for Great Britain and for the whole world cannot be
seen until the history, heritage and traditions which
allowed for the transformation from British Empire to
British Commonwealth are explained.

The Commonwealth is an
association of ten sovereign independent states - the United
Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa,
India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana and the Federation of Malaysia.
The inclining the republics accept the Queen as the 
symbol of their free association as members of the 
Commonwealth. They have a broad community of interest, 
ruining in part from the fact that each was at one time 
the responsibility of the United Kingdom. They speak a common 
political language and, in spite of diversity of race and 
tradition, possess a broadly similar pattern of institutions
whether legislative, executive or judicial. It is sometimes 
assumed that, having lost the thirteen American colonies in 
1783, Great Britain sat down in sackcloth and ashes, 
confessed her sins, resolved to be good ever after and 
endeavored responsible government on everybody until gradually 
in this century she realised it would be in her interest if 
all concerned have independence for her possessions. She 
did nothing of the sort and the British Empire saw numerous 
examples of inequalities, bad government, and selfishness and 
was certainly not founded on altruism but on hard commercial 
capitalism, and ancients realities. Thus cynics would say 
that Britain invented the Commonwealth to gain a lasting 
lives on her possessions and to halt the rapidly setting sun 
of her Empire, as nationalism within its component parts 
grew. Despite the fact however that one may draw the 
ultimate conclusion that Britain's Commonwealth ties serve 
her interests well, in many ways she also deserves much praise 
for the recognition of the fundamental human desire for 
national independence and the way she translated this into a 
living force.

The principles of self-government which led to the
political independence of members of the Commonwealth derive initially from Lord Avon's report issued in 1939 on the course of events in Canadian colonies. His suggestions for decolonizing these provided the starting point in a process of constitutional evolution that is still continuing throughout the Commonwealth. Every one of the member nations enjoys unfettered control of its own affairs for the Commonwealth is not a federation. Thus each country determines its foreign, domestic and fiscal policies, defines its citizenship and immigration regulations, negotiates and signs treaties with other nations, maintains its own diplomatic service and decides for itself the issues of peace and war. No longer does the entry of the United Kingdom into war automatically involve defeat of the Commonwealth as the case in 1914. In 1939 Australia and New Zealand, Canada and South Africa each makes its own declaration that war the last only after a proposal for formal neutrality has been debated and defeated in a free vote by its own Parliament. Each then a member of the Commonwealth, decided to remain neutral and continued to maintain diplomatic relations with Germany, Italy, and Japan, with which the rest of the Commonwealth was at war and that decision was accepted by then members of the Commonwealth. Members are free to join international organizations of which the decision of any other member and all have complete freedom on international issues.

In short, then, no member of the Commonwealth candidates any other in any matter whatsoever, nor is any Commonwealth nation under any obligation to
underwrite the responsibility undertaken by any other Commonwealth nation. It is however the maintenance of Commonwealth relationships and the influence of the Commonwealth in the world that on all leaders of Commonwealth concern there should be the greatest possible measure of community of interest and cooperation in action. And, in practice as Commonwealth solidarity in two world wars has shown, there is a fundamental unity of ideals and principles which overrids all trivial and sophistical differences of opinion. Moreover the frankness with which these differences are discussed in the family atmosphere of bilateral conferences and the comprehensive system of day-by-day communication and consultation that has developed between individual governments is one of the main sources of the strength of the Commonwealth associations. The precise way in which first of all the rather unwieldy body actually helps Britain's position in world affairs may be expressed under the heading 'prestige'; but it has become increasingly obvious that in many vital respects otherwise not in all, the Commonwealth is both a dynamic symbol of basic human principles and as such perhaps is one of the most important of the world's bulwarks against totalitarian Communism; secondly, the Commonwealth to a lesser extent, is an instrument, often being able to translate these ideals into living practice. These two factors then must inevitably reflect upon and confirm Great Britain's ideological strength, if not her military naval or financial superiority in the councils of the world.
Henry cannot live by bread alone, but he finds it difficult to live without cereals. As Edith Cowell said, "Patriotism is not enough," but it is difficult to maintain a political entity without it. Sentiment and material interest commonly go together and nothing is more difficult than to separate motives. It might be said that the last became a good Britain because it paid him whereas the Irishman did not because it did not. As Lord Trenchard, then Secretary of State for Air, said in 1947:

"We do not have regard membership of the Commonwealth as something to be thrust by force upon a reluctant people, but as a privilege granted only to those who deeply desire it and are conscious of their obligations as well as its advantages. The essence of Commonwealth relationships is that it is a free association of nations with a common purpose who belong together because they have decided of their own volition to do so and to take their fair share in a world-wide partnership."

In 1947 Prima decided to become a republic outside the Commonwealth, and a year later the same path was chosen. Most members of the Commonwealth do not for the most part think in the terms of the right to rule. It was not a basic assumption that the Commonwealth is not only voluntary and friendly but a lasting partnership, but rather planning would be meaningless. The Commonwealth, defined negatively, is not a federation, for there is no central government, defence force..."
or policy and an unbroken commitment. No is it comparable with a contractual alliance such as the
United Nations. It is necessary to convey one, and at the
same time the intimacy of Commonwealth relationships.

The late Mr. Peter Fraser, then Prime Minister of New
Zealand said: "This independence, with something added, not
independence with something taken away."

Furthermore, the Commonwealth
has what may be termed a "common heritage". Like the
United Kingdom, the Commonwealth has no written
constitution, but all its members have certain salient
constitutional features in common. They are parliamentary
democracies, their laws being made with the consent of a
freely elected parliament after discussion in that
parliament and the executive government holds office
because it has the support of the majority of members of
government. Ministers are collectively responsible for the
actions of the executive. With the exception of New Zealand
where the legislative council was abolished from 1st
January 1951, and Pakistan, the parliaments are bicameral,
but in the case of upper houses the method of choosing members
varies. The lower houses elect by secret ballot on a
basis of adult suffrage, are dominant, for it is the
majority support in them upon which governments depend
for their election in office and since they alone can
organise or amend financial legislation they hold the "power of
the purse". The existence of the commonwealth has enabled
several governments and peoples to operate as autonomous
entities and yet remain associated. The British Commonwealth then is not a state. It is a collection of nations, based on the rule of law and the fundamental rights of peoples, associated for purposes but dissociates for war. It is a new sort of entity that was not in the books, where the distinguishing characteristic is each member that its government is based on democratic principles. It was not a British invention, it was if responsibility can be allocated to Canadian, South African and Irish invention. Sir Wilfrid Laurier of Canada, General Smuts, (a great advocate of Commonwealth solidarity during and after the last war) and Verwoerd of South Africa, and Mr. de Klerk have been its chief architects, though they were odd architects who built without a plan. A French Canadian, two Afrikaners and a Spanish Italianian share a major part of the credit because they were concerned essentially with the problems of the Commonwealth. Another peculiarity of their peoples. The British contribution has been tolerance and an infinite capacity for adjusting feuds where necessity is the mother.

Thus the principle contribution of the Commonwealth to Britain's standing is that it is a great moral force which must reflect upon that country when she has the backing of so many "free" nations, to support its freely given and in reverse obligation in contrast to the unwilling Russian satellites, have to cling to war aims during the 1956 Suez operation, Canada and Australia stood firmly by Britain.
and helped her considerably in face of much opposition. The Imperial Conference of 1926 under the chairmanship of Lord Balfour expressed in classic terms what the Commonwealth symbolises in a world where the majority of mankind live under oppression and tyranny.

"A foreigner understanding to understand the true character of the British Empire by the end of this formula alone would be tempted to think it was already fixed to make mutual interference impossible than to combine mutual co-operation.

The British Empire is not founded upon rebellion, it depends essentially upon friendship and co-operation.

Free co-operation is its instrument.

"Free co-operation is its instrument."

How far does the Commonwealth strengthen Great Britain by putting into practice its positive principles? It has of course been most spectacular when the "free world" was in danger. In 1926 it was still possible to hope that the underlying unity of people of Commonwealth could not be parted. The test of sacrifice and that the purpose common to the Commonwealth and League of Nations would be worked out in harmonious cooperation without clash or interruption. The event has fallen out otherwise. But at least it has provided a clear demonstration that the Commonwealth is far from being held together.
by force in a group of peoples whose association is
strengthened rather than weakened by the call of
emergency. The "positive ideals" of which Lord Balfour
spoke in a quiet hour assume a deeper meaning and
stronger binding power when elements of civilized life are
being challenged by new doctrines promulgated at sword's
point.

Nevertheless it is in peace-time that the
Commonwealth is most in line with the interest of
Great Britain. By consultation and cooperation the
Commonwealth in many respects acts as an ideal unit.
Therefore Great Britain is saved from a narrow parochial,
viewpoint because of the richness of the opinions she is
able to share and she has a natural interest in many
parts of the "back and areas" of the world which help to
shape her policy in many respects. Furthermore in
helping and cooperating with these lands she helps herself
because they have her Christian tradition. They are a
silent target for Communism. The spread of which the
"West" passionately desires to resist. The opportunities
Great Britain has for gaining information and for
discussion with those responsible authorities must have
enlightening effect. The Commonwealth relations office
is the main channel in the United Kingdom through
which information on every possible subject of mutual
interest is received and communicated to the
Department of External Affairs of the other Commonwealth
nations. Where foreign policy is concerned the Commonwealth
Relating Office works in close association with the
Foreign Office. High Commission represent the
government of Commonwealth countries in their capitals.
The process of consultation between Commonwealth
governments and the transmission of information on
matters of common interest, their embassies play a
great part. In addition direct communication between
departments may be carried on when two or more
governments wish to exchange information on issues (e.g.
issues of foreign, economic or defence policy). There
are in addition conferences of Prime Ministers, Foreign
Ministers, Finance Ministers and Defence and Supply
Ministers. The importance attached to such conferences
is illustrated by the fact that in April 1949 the Prime
Ministers of Australia and New Zealand attended meetings in London
although their countries were at the time of General Election.
Ministerial visits, such as Mr. Menzies' recent Commonwealth
tour, sometimes for specific purposes, sometimes just to
gain first-hand knowledge of the country visited are in a
sense supplementary to full-scale conferences.

A member of
Commonwealth organisations have been set up, some of
which maintain permanent headquarters. Some examples
are the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Economic
Committee, the Association of Universities of the British
Commonwealth. Notably more outstanding than these
however are the definite co-operative efforts of 2 Commonwealth
countries particularly in the fields of science and education.
enriching Britain's intellectual force. Schemes for interchanges of
scientists include grants and post-graduate scholarships
offered, for example, by the British Council. Educational
co-operation was described in the Woodfield Foundation report
of 1952 as "the traffic of men and minds within the
Commonwealth," a movement which the Fund was
attempting to encourage because of its belief in the
enduring academic community of the Commonwealth,
a community which includes among its strongest
intangible ties the fact that its workers all speak
not only the philosophically and philosophically the same
language. Thus the Commonwealth possesses in many
respects a fluidity, a movement of intellect which can only
be beneficial to great Britain."

Moreover, the names of
Commonwealth countries are to be found in the
membership of many international organisations, such
as U.N.O., GATT and I.T.T. The Blunkett Plan for
co-operative economic development in South East Asia
had its origin at the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers
Conference held at Colombo in January 1950. Under
this plan financial and technical assistance is
given for the development of Commonwealth and other
member countries in South and South East Asia. It is
hoped that many of such schemes will only reflect
eventually Britain's benefit and increase her
international prestige.

Each Commonwealth country is
entirely responsible for organising its own defence and
determines the extent and nature of its commitments
at all times. But though there is no general central
organisation to co-ordinate defence strategy and the
resources of the Commonwealth, there is close liaison
between individual governments and valuable
practical cooperation by the services as in the
Korean War.

The British Empire was founded to a great
extent on the exigencies of trade, thus it might be
expected that even now the Commonwealth could prove
a relatively independent economic unit. Britain does gain much
benefit because of the accessibility of Commonwealth
countryside and markets, based under the general
heading "imperial preference" although this Commonwealth
country can be expected to consistently "buy British" if it
can get cheaper goods elsewhere. The reverse is also true,
the countries of the Commonwealth grant one another
certain tariff concessions. In recent years the effect of
these concessions has declined with rising prices and their
scope has been reduced. For example, as a result of
tariff negotiations under the General Agreement on
Tariffs and Trade, the United Kingdom has reduced or
eliminated preferences on goods which the import from
Commonwealth countries amounted to 10% in 1949.

Similar reductions were made in preferences enjoyed by the
United Kingdom in other Commonwealth countries.

In general then, it would seem
difficult to refute the assertion that the 
Commonwealth was materially and symbolically in an oral sense, considerably strengthening Britain. Yet there are 
three views which would say that the Commonwealth had not 
been a great impediment on Great Britain at least a 
positive and very strong factor. This criterion 
aside, the fact that naturally the bonds 
uniting the Commonwealth are not as strong as the rest. 
Thus there is likely to arise at any time to arise a 
strong desire which could split them. Thus crisis in 
November 1956 shows this aspect for it even seems at 
one point that India would leave the Commonwealth. 
If Britain had not the unwilling body associated with 
her it is possible her position would have been 
weaker for because of their familiarity with Britain, 
other countries such as Ghana feel they 
have an added right to criticize Great Britain and 
would remain in power. 

Secondly some statesmen 
and leading figures in Britain and apt to put the 
Commonwealth the first when that would prove detrimental 
to Britain's best interest. Thus for example, in Manchester and the 
labour party oppose green trade with Europe on the 
grounds the Empire first, despite the fact that the 
recent Commonwealth Conference of Finance 
ministers urged this greater European co-operation on the 
grounds that it would benefit the great Britain world.
ultimately help the Commonwealth, thus rather than taking the wind out of the sails of the Empireayers.

Allied to this is the criticism that the Commonwealth was great Britain's bread trains and warpower through emigration, and indirect in many investment and development schemes. The United

Kingdom is a major source of financial aid for Commonwealth economic industrialisation. For example

the British Government has agreed to release £6 million

from its capital subscription to the International Bank for

Loan within the Sterling area over five years from 1953,

the West Indies in particular need development. Similarly,

Commonwealth Imperial concerns often distract Britain's

attention from their perhaps more urgent overseas

affairs, for example in India, Malaya and Rhodesia.

It is often very difficult for Britain to turn

whence a country is politically mature enough

for independence and Ghana for example has had many

teething troubles. Moreover, although the Commonwealth

also Britain became associated with policies with which

she does not necessarily agree, for example racial

segregation in South Africa. Finally, by the continued

existence of the Commonwealth, the successor to the

British Empire, Britain often suffers from the legacy of

her own past; she is still thought by many countries

to be an imperialist power, and the very name raises

suggestions of colonialism and police work alike. The

Commonwealth is therefore her last desperate attempt
to preserve her former colonial possessions. Thus in 1916 attempting to prove his own theory about imperialism, he did not distinguish the Dominions from the independent Empire. Many of these who are quite unable to accept this thesis have drawn the assumption that the British Commonwealth is an instrument by which Great Britain "exploits" various peoples, thus, however unjustly, Britain's standing in the world in the eyes of other peoples often lessened, paradoxically by her Commonwealth association.

Despite these relatively minor criticisms the British Commonwealth and through it Britain herself stands as a vital force in the world today. Admittedly, it does not act as an isolated unit. In 1924 the Labour government recognised the Soviet government of the U.S.S.R. without consulting the Dominions, but in 1939, on the other hand, the Dominions were consulted before the Provisional government of Spanish Republic was recognised. It is not easy to describe this situation which has evolved and been able to make concessions to the wishes of time and yet have none of its power. It must be noted that each nation has its own policy based on its national interests, ideas of international morality which prevail amongst its citizens and the political majority of the country parliamentary majority. Yet on the majority of international issues peoples of the Commonwealth are apt to think remarkably alike. It would be wrong to assume for
instance that the attitude of the Dominions to Britain would be the same as that of the Netherlands to this country. The dominions have set up bases for themselves but they are still dependent on the Mother of Parliament. In other words, although Great Britain and the Dominions are independent, their policies are not fundamentally different and movements in each have their repercussions elsewhere, a factor which has dangers as well as great advantages. Australia may be found leading small nations against a predominance of great powers, including Britain, Canada may be more American than British on a particular issue, South Africa and India may be in conflict over the colour bar and yet there will be evidence of a Commonwealth "the". The power of compromise as the present Cyprus discussion proves essential, and it is this quality which has generally distinguished Great Britain and which eventually triumphs against seemingly enormous odds.

On balance then, one is drawn to the conclusion that Britain can only derive gain and support from her Commonwealth associations. This lies not primarily in the material sphere, in strength of numbers or economic benefits, but the fact is that this unique body is a great moral symbol. It proves that men of Chinese race, religion, and temperament, forgetting, for the most part, old animosities can at least agree on one thing: it is only by acting as rational beings and using the medium...
communication by discussion and peaceful cooperation can likewise become habitable, prosperous and free. Only by these means can truth be asserted, illusions dispelled, and men's minds broadened by mutual knowledge and understanding of one another's problems. Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the late Mr. Mackenzie King, then Prime Minister of Canada said:

"I have sometimes wondered whether the experiences in co-operation and association of the countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, to which Canada is proud to belong, have not some lessons both positive and negative which might be of help in like difficulties in the development of a world community sense.... In this wise limited experiment in international political association, there are some things which may be of value in shaping the development of the United Nations." Perhaps Britain and the Commonwealth have a way to paraphrase this, help save the world by their example of the fundamental unity of interest which runs like a thread through all the nations of the world. In this way and in the path pursued by the Commonwealth, lies the future hope for mankind.
Plan of Essay

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A. Introduction
Definition and etymology of the Commonwealth, its composition and outstanding features, its principles, the inevitability of the emergence of Commonwealth from the Empire.

B. Value of Commonwealth for Great Britain
(a) Commonwealth as a symbol - working for peace by means of cooperation based on democracy, freedom and the rule of law and therefore commanding great prestige in areas where many peoples are deprived of these fundamental human maxims, great moral force.

(b) Commonwealth as an instrument; many examples of the value of interchange of ideas and means to prevent parochialism and broaden outlook.

Political support of Commonwealth nations for Great Britain, e.g., in UNO, more valuable because it is freely given.

Economic benefits of Commonwealth.

C. Advantages of Commonwealth association
(a) Commonwealth united by notable links.
(b) Often Commonwealth is put before best interests.

D. Conclusion - true nature and value of Commonwealth in Britain. Commonwealth on balance is of great value naturally; for example, it prevents and helps to prevent the spread of communism and usually because of the great unity in diversity, which has its foundations not
in self-interest but a feeling of the community of mankind in days when nation states are rapidly becoming obsolete.
"The British Commonwealth of Nations" - Sir James F. A. Jeffreys
"Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs" - Professor H. E. B. Hancox
"Passing the Frontier" - Sir C. Jeffreys
"Colonial Town and Its Libraries" - H. H. C. G. O. H. E.
"The Commonwealth in Brief" - H. M. S. O.
From the British Empire to British Commonwealth - Professor Zvejnieks
Britain and South Africa - E. A. Walker
Encyclopaedia Britannica
Articles in "Time", "Sunday Times", "Observer"