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"EMPIRE" or "COMMONWEALTH"

how have these two terms come to  
be applied to the King's realms,  
and what is their significance and  
difference.

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## Summary.

General Smuts responsible for title 'British Commonwealth of Nations'.  
- The British Empire an unique phenomenon in politics - The significance of "EMPIRE" - The difficulty of exactly defining the territories which are under the rule or protection of Britain - The difference between the British Empire and any other Empire known to history - The shortcomings and differences of past Empires - The Imperial Conference - "COMMONWEALTH", its significance - Burke - The difference between "EMPIRE" and "COMMONWEALTH" - The advantages of "COMMONWEALTH" over "EMPIRE" - The difficulty of discarding "EMPIRE" for ever - The history of the word "EMPIRE" in British politics and how it came to be applied to the King's Realms - Burke on the British Empire - What a "COMMON - WEALTH" is - The idea that we should speak of the peoples of the Commonwealth rather than the "COMMONWEALTH" - The achievement of the British Commonwealth of Nations - The proof that peoples of different nationalities, language and colour, can live in peace and freedom, and that a true Commonwealth can be founded only on interdependence - The example of co-operation, the secret lying in oneness; this the reason we fight - to protect our freedom and to maintain the British Commonwealth of Nations which will in the end bring Peace to the world.

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"Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,  
Survey our empire, and behold our home".

BYRON-CORSAIR. Canto I, stanza I.

"All Empire is no more than power in trust".

DRYDEN. "Absolom and Achitophel", line 411.

Empire or Commonwealth, General Smuts once remarked that the man who found an appropriate name would be doing a service to the Empire. He himself was responsible for the title - "British Commonwealth of Nations". That title represents a reaction against the implication involved in the use of a word properly descriptive of military dominion. An Emperor, was in ancient days, invariably an autocrat, ruling over the peoples of his empire by force. But those who adopt the more recent term COMMONWEALTH (Unless they restrict its application) fall into error less venial than those who prefer the older term. The truth is that the British Empire, including as it does, the British Commonwealth of Nations (but much else besides), is an unique phenomenon in politics. On the stage of human history it stands apart alone.

The term "EMPIRE" was applied to the territories ruled over by the King of England long before they included any lands beyond the ocean, and we may conveniently begin our study by noting what was the original significance of the term in this connection. Among the political groupings of the world the British Empire stands unique and incapable of exact description by the usual terms of political science. other/



other organisms can be fitted into categories as republics or monarchies, unitary or federal states, and so on, but the British Empire is 'sui generis' and defies inclusion in any of the categories. Its present structure can only be explained by the historical growth, the process by which the sway of ancient English monarchy has been extended into every continent, so that it now includes every type of state from the most primitive to the most complex. We call the aggregate an "EMPIRE" but it differs widely from any empire known to history. Usually the term has implied centralisation or rule, domination over dependents held down by military force and unity of governmental system. None of these characterises the British Empire, for there is no centralisation, there is no uniformity, and there is no domination by the military force of a governing race or caste. But as the outcome of its historical development it possesses one of the traditional attributes of "EMPIRE" to the full - its independence of any external authority, and it is for this reason that the King's realms have always been called an empire in official phraseology ever since the reign of Richard II at the end of the fourteenth century. At that time the Emperor who ruled in Central Europe, the successor of Charlemagne, Otto the Great and Frederick Barbarossa, claimed rights of feudal overlordship over most European monarchs save the Kings of England, who marked their independence by asserting their own IMPERIUM, standing alongside and with equal status with the Holy Roman Empire itself. The idea has been consecrated by more than five centuries of unbroken usage and thus we may claim that this freedom and independence of external influence are the essential characteristics which mark the King's realms rightly as "The British Empire".

Thus/



Thus with the great Empires of the ancient world the British Empire has little if anything in common. IMPERIUM signified originally the right possessed by a Roman magistrate to employ force to secure obedience to his orders. The great empires of antiquity conformed to the type suggested by that word. The Empires of Egypt and Babylon, the Assyrian Empire and the Persian, were military autocracies. Founded by soldiers they were sustained by the sword. Whether the hegemony attained by Athens, after the defeats she had inflicted on Persia at Salamis and Marathon, can properly be described as an Empire is doubtful. Thucydides specifically disclaimed for Athens the character of Empire ( $\alpha\pi\alpha\rho\chi\eta$ ) and insisted that she enjoyed only the first place ( $\eta\gamma\chi\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\nu\varsigma$ ) in a league of autonomous states. The Empire of Greece was not political: it was spiritual and intellectual. Immune from mortal decays, it was eternal. Greece, thus failed to solve the problem of Empire; since the political ideal of the Greeks never went beyond the perfection of the city - State. Rome was originally a City-State of the Greek type. The Roman Empire was as heterogeneous as the British but the policy Rome pursued in relation to the subject communities was as generous as it was successful. Marvellous as was the Imperial administration of Rome, it had one irremediable weakness. Wide as it opened the gate of citizenship, citizenship conferred no right of participation in the government. The rule of Rome was despotic -

Gibbon's "DECLINE and  
FALL" vol. IV. 403.

"The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquer and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to its own weight! "



of the Nations which invaded Britain not one remains as conqueror. A mysterious destiny gripped them and destroyed their individuality. Even now it continues to work English, Scottish and Welsh elements into a national pattern. The remarkable thing, called the British mind, is the product of centuries of the process of amalgamation. Indefinite in contour and vapoury on the outside it possesses a kernel shining with a steady spiritual light. It is the expression of the influence of the higher conscience of man upon the formation of national characteristics. The British mind has for once expressed itself in a striking sentence of the Report of the Imperial Conference of 1926 which defines the position and the mutual relationship of the parts of the Empire:

"They are autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, 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."

What is the meaning of this? A farrago of commonplaces designed to mask defeat, or a flash of future fulfilment? The Report remarks:

"A foreigner endeavouring to understand the true character of the British Empire by the aid of this formula alone would be tempted to think that it was devised rather to make mutual interference impossible than to make mutual co-operation easy. Such a criticism, however, completely ignores the historic situation ----".

The British formula is fluid, yet there is a sense of triumph and solidity about it which reminds us of Galilei's "E pur se muove"- yes, the earth is going round. And the Empire is going on. The British/



British mind refuses to go by the road which evidently leads towards destruction; in a moment it has abandoned it and is striding towards new achievements and life. For that is what the Imperial formula represents: an intense conviction of the right to exist and a refusal to be daunted by obstacles which to other people would announce defeat. The curious remark about the inability of the foreigner to understand the formula incidentally shows the power of the British mind over the alien elements which have been absorbed already in the national melting pots.

It was mentioned by a prominent member of the Conference that at the back of the discussion, in spite of a large divergence of opinions which culminated at times into acrimonious disputes, there was a general conviction of the need "To stand or fall together". Translated into plain words, this means that the members of the Conference were convinced, or had become convinced, of the need for continuing the Imperial link for this mutual benefit. A proof of this is to be found - if one knows the peculiar working of the British mind - in the new formula for Dominion Status which has been mentioned above. After having mentioned "autonomous communities" and having affirmed their independent position within the Empire the formula ends by describing them as "freely associated members of the British Commonwealth of Nations". Now the word Commonwealth has a definite meaning: it describes a number of people or a social body united by some common interest. Burke as far back as 1796 speaking of Europe as a Commonwealth of Nations explained: "It is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law: with some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments". The British Empire in this sense is a Commonwealth/



Commonwealth of Nations the vital interests of which command them to accept a general constitutional law. Whilst the word "EMPIRE" refers to a status in the present, the word "COMMONWEALTH" is evidently inspired by the recognised need for future co-operation. From this point of view the introduction of the word into the new formula is significant. Let us take for example the essential question of defence. The loosely knit form given purposely to the Empire and the importance attached to complete Dominion autonomy excludes the possibility of a ruling which should oblige all the parts of the Empire to go to war if one of them declares it. But in the word "COMMONWEALTH" is contained certainly the grain of the idea that if a member of the Empire is attacked the others must come to his assistance - September 1939: all the Dominions and Colonies with the exception of Eire declared war on Germany. That the widespread idea that Empire must imply dominion by force is mainly due to a wrong historial perspective, exaggerating the militarist and absolutist association of the last century and a quarter and ignoring many others, very different, of eighteen centuries before. But, as Seely pointed out long ago, there is also a scientific objection to the use of the word to denote the community of the British Realms, which has much historical justification. The British Empire is a new political phenomenon, unlike any State hitherto known; and the revelation of a new phenomenon, the acquisition of a new object of thought, should involve the invention of a new term. Politics, however, being an art rather than a science, its craftsmen generally contest with the words coined to describe the few types of States existing in the ancient world, that objection does not seem to have perturbed any prominent statesman/



statesman until 1917, when it was elaborated in a speech by General Smuts: "The very word 'EMPIRE' is misleading ---- We are not one State or Nation or Empire, but a whole world by ourselves, consisting of many nations of many States, and all sorts of communities under one flag ---- All belong to this community ---- which I prefer to call the British Commonwealth of Nations ---- No political ideas which have been evolved in the past will apply to this world which is comprised in the British Empire."

The term "COMMONWEALTH" has since found much favour as an alternative for "EMPIRE". It has obvious advantages. Its original meaning is beautiful and fitting; it is almost unstained by history (though strangely enough, it was for long unpopular in England because of its association with the period when the Government became, for the first and only time, both militarist and absolute): its appropriation by Australia has but enriched its context by a suggestion of a voluntary federation of free peoples: it is not defaced by long currency in the language of politics, and is therefore comparatively accurate, unspoil't by the ambiguity which is a real objection to "EMPIRE". Nevertheless, the complete disuse of the older term is inconceivable. For over two centuries the British Realms have been spoken of collectively as the "EMPIRE"; the word and its adjective imperial, could not be officially discarded without a break with tradition unparalleled in our constitutional history, and nothing could remove them from many historical documents. General Smuts might emphasise the theoretical advantages of "COMMONWEALTH", but "EMPIRE", not "COMMONWEALTH", rings through Botha's call to action nearly a year later:-

"The/



"The Empire to which we belong is to-day fighting a righteous war, and is passing through the gravest crisis in its history ----. While chivalry lives and honour remains, so long as duty has not become a byword, so long as a common destiny unites us to the Empire, such a call for help must and will be answered by the manhood of South Africa". Since, then, the word "EMPIRE" cannot be displaced, and will continue to be a name by which the British Commonwealth of Nations is generally known, it is well to remember that many of its associations are good, though some are evil; that many are appropriate, though some are incongruous; that the finest characteristics of the British Empire have been foreshadowed actually or ideally, by certain Empires of the past. A survey of its history including that of its source and equivalent "IMPERIUM" shows that it has passed through four widely different phases. The first is that of the Empire of ancient Rome; the second that of the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages. In the third there was no longer any Empire universally recognised, hence the word acquired various general meanings and came to be used with reference to various Powers, among them that of Great Britain. The fourth is that of the modern European Empires of the two Napoleons, of the Russian Tsars and the Austrian and German Kaisers, and also that of our special application of the term to India. Burke defined "EMPIRE" thus:

"An Empire is the aggregate of many states under one common head, whether this head be a monarch or a presiding republic ---- a great political union of communities".

Applied to various powers, Anglo-Saxon, European, African and Asiatic, the word has been in common use in this sense ever since the fourteenth/



fourteenth century. Protector Somerset was said to have proposed that the names Scotland and Scottish, England and English, should be suppressed and the two peoples and the two kingdoms be united into one Empire, always to be called the Empire of Great Britain. Under James I the United Kingdom was called an imperial monarchy in a proclamation of 1604, and the phrase "British Empire" first appears in a petition to him that year. It was definitely used to include the colonies a century later (1708) by a writer who says, "Our colonies in America are so far from being a loss to us, that there are no hands in the British Empire more usefully employed for the profit or glory of the Commonwealth"; but it was not in general or official use with that meaning till after 1765 when it became familiar in discussions of the policy of taxing the American colonies, being employed by politicians differing much in opinion, by opponents as well as supporters of that policy.

In all the chorus of applauding comment evoked in 1917 by General Smuts' panegyric on the British Commonwealth of Nations there was, I think, not a single allusion to its echoes, phrase after phrase, of the famous speech, an unavailing plea for conciliation with America, in which that definition occurs. Yet there has never been a clearer case of vindication by the verdict of History; and one would like to imagine Burke comforted in his defeat by some foreknowledge of his ultimate victory, when in the same place, more than a hundred years after, an oration in praise of "The advantages to be derived from the communion and fellowship of a great Empire", its concord maintained "By a unity of spirit in a diversity of operations", would be delivered before an audience as sympathetic as his was hostile, representing/



representing a Commonwealth of Nations for wider than the Empire he knew. To him the word had none of the sinister associations of the nineteenth century; and a final illustration of its nobler historical uses may well be taken from the magnificent peroration in which his great argument reached its height:

"As long as you have the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanctuary of liberty ---- wherever the chosen race and sons of England worship freedom, they will turn their faces towards you ----. Slavery they can have anywhere ----. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia, but ---- freedom they can have from none but you ----. Deny them this participation of freedom, and you break that sole bond which originally made, and, must still preserve, the unity of the Empire ----. It is the spirit of the English Constitution which ---- unites, invigorates, vivifies every part of the Empire ----. Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom, and a great Empire and little minds go ill together".

A survey of the two thousand years during which "Imperium" and "EMPIRE" have been current political terms thus shows that their connection with militarism and absolutism belongs without qualification only to the last, the post Napoleonic, of these four phases, with some qualification to the first, that of the Roman Empire; hardly at all to the second and third. Until quite recently the idea predominant among the many associated with the word has been that of some political unity in diversity, culminating in the mediaeval conception of Christendom, Dante's imperial suzerainty, depending on sanctions wholly spiritual, is far indeed from dominion by force; but there is a real resemblance between his ideal of a peace - maintaining Empire, and/



and the actual commonwealth that makes war inconceivable among the British realms; between his world-community, comprehending the many others needed for the full development of all the capacities of mankind, and the Empire which stands, according to General Smuts, 'for a fuller, a richer, a more varied life among all the peoples that compose it.

A Commonwealth is a society of human beings living in one territory united by a common obedience to laws the purpose of which is the enlargement of liberty. It is not an abstract personailty, claiming unquestioning obedience from its citizens. Nor is it a voluntary association of people temporarily united by bonds of interest or contract. It is a community the members of which are individually dedicated to promote one another's liberty and welfare, in obedience to the principles of justice and truth which they embody in their laws. It is indeed a misnomen to speak of the commonwealth at all. It is nearer to the truth to speak of the people or the nations of the Commonwealth, for it is the people who are the Commonwealth, and what unites them is not loyalty to a government but loyalty to one another and to the principles which inspire their constitutions and their laws. Liberty, is the life-blood of the Commonwealth, because only in freedom can a man serve his neighbour as he should. But liberty is inseparably yoked with responsibility. Hence democracy, in the sense that public policy and the law which governs social relations should be determined by the free votes of all qualified citizens, who thereby become solely responsible for the conditions under which they live, is an invariable characteristic of the true Commonwealth. The achievement of the British Commonwealth of/



of Nations was a political task far harder than any that has yet been achieved by mankind. It represents as great an advance over anything which now exists as the American federation represented over anything previously known. It depended upon the ability of the peoples of the Empire to take another constructive step in the science of human government, upon their power to utilise natural feeling not to divide but to unite, to bind together in one Commonwealth great nations separated from each other "by the unplumb'd salt estranging sea", to recognise that citizenship of a Commonwealth of many nations is a greater thing than that of a national State and a necessary step towards the unity and peace of the world. There never yet has been such a Commonwealth. Great Empires have been reared in the past on the basis of autocratic military power. They have never yet been founded upon liberty and democracy. The British Commonwealth has been the greatest fountain of political freedom in the world. It has nursed young nations to maturity and peace. It has laid the foundations of self-government among countless millions of politically backward peoples. It has proved the bulwark against which the forces of autocracy and reaction have cast themselves in vain. The people of this Commonwealth of Nations have created the institution which will eventually give liberty and unity and peace to the world. For they have proved that nations and peoples of almost every race and colour, speaking almost every variety of language, professing nearly every form of religion and civilisation, and scattered over the four corners of the globe can be united into a single whole - a whole in which every part is self-governing or approaching self-government, and in which there is also an assembly through which its responsible citizens can/



can think and act together as one people. In the epoch which followed ancient times the light began to dawn. The Commons of England without knowing it conceived the device of representation. They did what Aristotle had said could never be done. The seed of this system spread to the wider field of America and there flowered in thirteen states. The world owes to America the knowledge how to create for one territory, however vast, a Commonwealth including a great diversity of peoples.

The principles born of English experience were carried to the uttermost parts of the earth. In Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Africa new nations came into being and acquired control of all their affairs as complete as that of the British themselves. The problem of Ireland centuries old was solved on these principles. The duty of encouraging India to acquire autonomy was conceived and announced; steps to that end were deliberately taken. The same principle was accepted and avowed as the ultimate goal in tropical Africa. In this twentieth century the five continents and all their peoples are more closely connected than the thirteen states of America were in the eighteenth century. They are more in need of one government and law than the Mediterranean peoples in the time of Caesar; and as Aristotle wrote that the city republic was the last word in the growth of the Commonwealth, so the wisest of our time speak, think and act as if national commonwealths were the last word in civilization. To speak of a Commonwealth embracing the whole world as the goal to which we are travelling is to forfeit the serious attention of practical statesmen. The British Empire is not such a commonwealth. It includes but a quarter of the human race. It obeys no government which is responsible/



responsible in the true sense of the word to all the members who are fit for the task. But they have convinced the world that a true Commonwealth can be founded only on interdependence - that the organisation of all human society in one Commonwealth is the practical and necessary goal of human endeavour, and ought to be treated as such. A Commonwealth is the sermon on the mount reduced to political terms, a society organised on the theory that the duty which each of its members owes to the rest is beyond measure. The sovereignty of the Commonwealth is the necessary outcome of that principle, whether the Commonwealth be city or nation. The conflict of sovereignty will never be solved until all men are organised in one society, as Jesus of Nazareth taught. By helping that Commonwealth to come the will of God can be done, and thus only. In the river of time the British Commonwealth stands, a line of unfinished piers, yet to be crowned with arches whereby mankind shall cross to "that far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves" - and leave the bridge behind them.

No example gives so coherent a working example of co-operation between free nation-states, each with a character of its own, in pursuit of a common goal and as members of one family as the British Commonwealth of Nations. The secret of that diversity is oneness, that harmony of difference lies in the blend of freedom with its habit of co-operation. It lies less in a constitution than in an indefinable spirit. We would give all that we have and are to defend this country of ours. But that "green and pleasant" land is not only the woods and fields, the street that leads to our home and the roof that covers us; nor is it simply her parliament and the places where we worship God, or the schools and the colleges where we learn. These things are in peril/



peril. Britain holds the sword of survival, and all the crushed races amid their tears and misery look to us as their only hope. We are fighting for survival against the terrific military engine of the Axis powers. If we lose, we are doomed to the slavery of Poland, the grief of Norway, the ruin of Holland, the utter humiliation of France. We are fighting not only for a cause. We are fighting this time to preserve this precious soil which no invader has fouled for a thousand years. In its defence weak men will fight like giants and workers in town and village like tigers. But this struggle is more than that. It is a titanic struggle between all that is right, all that is lovely, all that we value, against the most evil force that has ever threatened mankind. Our British sword has become the sword of civilisation. We have got to fight - to fight as human beings have never fought before. The descendants of Attila may bring destruction upon our cathedrals, our churches, our ancient buildings, they may devastate much that is beautiful and venerated by civilised men of the world over but if they think that the destruction of those things can destroy the soul of England or weaken the spirit of the British Commonwealth of Nations, they will have a rude awakening.

"It is the land that freemen till,  
That sober-suited Freedom chose;  
The land, where girt with friends or forces  
A man may speak the thing he will;  
A land of settled government,  
A land of just and old renown,  
Where freedom slowly broadens down  
From precedent to precedent".

Tennyson - 'You Ask Me Why'.

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