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Advance of speech by the Right Hon. C. R. Attlee,
M.P., Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State
for Dominion Affairs, to be given to the Young Mens'
Fellowship in the Tabernacle Chapel, Carmarthen, on
Friday, 3rd September, 1943.

BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND EMPIRE

We are meeting on the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of the war. I am certain that the first feeling of everyone of us to-day should be one of deep thankfulness that in the mercy of God we have been brought thus far in safety through such great perils. In September 1939 we knew we were encountering a great danger; we were meeting a powerful and ruthless enemy that had been preparing for war and for nothing but war year after year, while we and our Allies were striving for peace.

We know that time would be needed before the forces of democracy could be gathered together, and we hoped that that time would be afforded. We knew at that time the danger, but we did not know then its extent.

Three years ago we stood in mortal terror. Poland had been destroyed, Denmark, Norway and the Low Countries had been overrun, France had fallen. The whole of Europe west of Russia was under the domination of Hitler. Mussolini had just brought Italy in on what he thought was the winning side. Our small Army had with difficulty escaped from Dunkirk. The Battle of Britain had begun, and its issue was hidden from us.

Those of us who were in the war Cabinet knew more fully than the rest of the people our weakness and the extent of the danger to our country. We stood alone, but who were we? Forty four millions of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland? No - the four hundred millions of the British Commonwealth and Empire. For when the challenge came to the world to choose between freedom and tyranny, between democracy and autocracy, between the principles of Western civilisation derived from the heritage of Greece, Rome and Palestine, between right and wrong, with one exception only, the whole British Commonwealth and Empire stood to arms united and resolved.

Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, great nations free and equal partners with ourselves in the British Commonwealth, of their own free wills declared war against Nazi Germany, while the other units of the Empire, all of them in various stages moving forward along the same road to self-government trodden by the Dominions, were no less forward in the common cause.

I will remember how in those days we were cheered by the arrival of Canadian and Australian troops, and how in Africa troops from South Africa and India and from Australia and New Zealand, yes and from African Colonies as well, rallied against the new menace which threatened us when Italy entered the war.

I recall, too, to-day very vividly our feelings when Japan entered the war by her felon attack on the United States, the Dutch and ourselves. I remember the mixed feelings which we had then. The satisfaction that the great forces of the United States were now being brought into play on the side of the democracies and our knowledge that inevitably we were bound to suffer grave losses in the Far East.

I recall our anxieties for our kinsmen in Australia and New Zealand whose forces were engaged in the battles in the Middle East. It is a different picture to-day. The Japanese onrush has been halted. The wave of their attack is ebbing. In due course it will return whence it came.

/But

But it is well to recall to-day the imminent danger in which Australia and New Zealand stood then and how well they met this threat which, for the first time in their history, menaced their own home lands.

I think this experience of a common danger has served to knit even closer the ties which bind us to our Dominions in the Pacific area. Let me also say here that I have abundant evidence of the way in which the inhabitants of the islands of Oceania have stood firm and rendered splendid service against the Japanese invaders.

I heard only the other day of how two schoolboys from the Solomon Islands, who had been evacuated with their school when the Japanese attacked, volunteered for service with the American forces, how they served as guides in the reconquest of Guadalcanal, and how, after a successful campaign, they returned again to school as if they had done nothing worthy of note.

I sometimes hear depreciation of our rule, but let us not overlook the fact that faith in our rule and in British justice has been exemplified by many gallant actions by our fellow subjects of many different races.

It is a different picture to-day. Africa has been cleared of our enemies. Mussolini has fallen and the Italians have little stomach for the fight. Everywhere the Germans are on the defensive. Our mighty Ally Russia continues to strike heavy blows, while the air war grows more intense and everywhere the forces of the United Nations take the offensive.

The war is not yet won and this is no time for any relaxation in our efforts. We do not know what surprises the incalculable chances of war may yet hold for us, but we face the future to-day with unity and confidence.

It is natural, therefore, this evening that I should wish to say something to you about the British Commonwealth and Empire - this remarkable political experiment which has shown such strength when subjected to the test of war - for I believe that by studying the British Commonwealth and Empire we may learn lessons valuable for the future of mankind.

If you study the methods by which Hitler has brought under his domination the greater part of Europe, you will find that he has always employed both policy and violence. His policy has always been to create or foment disunity in the nations which he wished to attack. The fundamental cause of the weakness of Europe in face of the Nazi attack was due to this fatal disunity.

In some countries it was the disunity between racial elements, minorities distrusted majorities and majorities were not willing to concede their just rights to minorities. In others it was disunity between classes, but the result was the same in every case - disunity was the prelude to destruction. And to take a wider sweep, it was the failure of the nations which defeated the German menace in 1918 to effect a real unity of all peace-loving peoples which allowed the ugly spectre of German aggression to raise its head again.

In contrast to this stands Hitler's failure to create disunity within the British Commonwealth and Empire. Here in this country, although our political divisions are deep, in time of need we were able to transcend them in the interests of the whole community. Throughout the British Commonwealth and Empire there are immense diversities of race, colour, creed and degrees of civilisation, yet the links that unite all together, though often intangible, proved strong as steel in the day of trial.

Why was this? I think because, despite many shortcomings and failures to implement fully the ideals which we hold, the British Commonwealth and Empire have stood for freedom and justice, and that we have learnt through long centuries the lesson of how to live together without attempting to exact regimented uniformity.

We had to learn that lesson first of all in this Island and it took many years of strife and bloodshed before we reached a position in which English and Welsh and Scots were able to unite while retaining each of them their own particular characteristics.

I know there are still groups of extreme nationalists in Wales and in Scotland who agitate for greater privileges for the smaller nations in this Island. I have even known at times Englishmen who complained under a series of Prime Ministers drawn from Scotland and Wales that we ought to have some home rule for England. But broadly speaking, in this Island, we allow full play for national characteristics, which, by their very differences, enrich the content of the whole. It may well be that these lessons in mutual forbearance have helped our people when they went overseas to build up communities imbued with a spirit of tolerance.

If you review the British Commonwealth and Empire you will find that progress towards complete self-government within it is dependent on either the homogeneity of the population, as in Australia, or in the ability of the different races to live together without much friction, as in Canada, and that the greatest obstacle to full self-government is found, not in the unwillingness of Great Britain to part with the right of deciding other peoples' affairs, but in the inability of communities to settle their own differences.

India is perhaps the outstanding example. Nothing stands in the way of the attainment of complete self-government by the Indian peoples save the rooted mutual distrust of the different communities. You will find the same problem exemplified in other parts of the Empire, such as Ceylon and in the Mandated Territory of Palestine. You will find it also in many parts of the Empire where communities with widely different standards of life are living in the same territory.

Some of these difficulties are very intractable. Others are in the process of being removed, but in fact these difficulties cannot be got over by clever constitutional devices, for their solution depends on the spirit in which institutions are worked.

We should make a great mistake if we regarded the British Empire and Commonwealth as something static. On the contrary its whole history shows a process of development. At first this was largely unconscious. The Empire grew by a series of unplanned events. There was no policy directed towards the building up of this great association of peoples nor was there any clear idea of the relations of one part to another.

It is really only during the last half century that people have begun to think out the relationships between the various constituent parts to Britain and to each other. The process by which the Dominions came to reach a position of equality with Great Britain came about gradually. The Statute of Westminster which defined the relationship only put the seal on what had already been done.

We must not assume that the way in which we work out that relationship is necessarily final. It may be as time goes on that we shall find that we need more elaborate machinery for getting that unity of action which has been so strikingly in evidence during the war.

It may well be that the tremendous advances in air travel that we are now seeing may lead to developments in co-operation which we cannot now foresee. But I can assure you that we have already found in this war what a great advantage it is to be able to have visits from statesmen, officials and service chiefs from the Dominions to this country and from Britain to the Dominions.

There is certainly not enough knowledge either among our own people or among our friends and allies of the British Empire. People are inclined to draw a hard and fast line between the Dominions and the rest of the Empire and think of one category as completely self-governing and the other as wholly governed from Whitehall.

There is as a matter of fact a very wide range of difference between our various colonies and dependencies. In the West Indies for instance there are colonies such as the Barbadoes and Bermuda that have had a degree of self-government for over 250 years.

It is true that the self-government is not complete and that the franchise is restricted, but it is nevertheless very far removed from complete government by Whitehall. In our African Colonies there is a very large amount of indirect rule by native chiefs and through native democratic assemblies.

In Ceylon where you have again the difficulty of minority communities there is a special form of self-government which may be regarded as an experiment, for it has features which distinguish it sharply from our own parliamentary system, although I have known British Parliamentarians advocate a somewhat similar system for this country as an improvement.

/In India

In India in the provinces you have parliaments and ministries on the British model which deal with more than ninety per cent of all those things that concern the ordinary citizen. Southern Rhodesia is not technically a Dominion because certain powers designed for the protection of the interests of the African native are reserved to the British Government but in all other respects, except in the field of foreign relations, there is complete self-government.

There are also in the Empire instances of protected States in which the native ruler governs, subject to a certain amount of direction.

I have given you a few instances out of many. The point that I should like you to note is this that there is no one sealed pattern of democracy. Institutions have to be adapted to the genius of the people who have to use them and to the conditions of particular countries.

When you look at any particular country it is well to ask not how free are these people compared with those in some distant country, but in which direction are they moving. Are they moving towards greater freedom or less? How fast are they moving? How long have they been on the road? How near scratch were they when they became members of the British Empire?

When you look at the recurring wars in Europe, in the Far East and even occasionally in South America, you will acknowledge that it is no slight thing that over nearly a quarter of the world's surface there is a political organisation that ensures internal peace.

All parties in this country are committed to the policy of the steady increase of self-government within the Empire but all thoughtful people recognise that the pace of this advance must vary with the conditions in different countries. We have to be certain that under colour of giving self-government we are not handing over those who trust us to be exploited by sectional interests.

Meanwhile it is worth remembering that there are in the House of Commons men and women who are always ready to question the Government if anything which looks like injustice or misgovernment is brought to their notice.

A German may think he is a superman and despise the negro in a British colony, but the negro is the freer citizen. If the German is oppressed by the Gauleiter there is no one to raise a voice on his behalf but if the African feels that he is unjustly treated he may be sure that a letter to an M.P. will bring his case before the House of Commons.

We have, therefore, this great responsibility as a nation that we have to guide a whole company of peoples on the road to democracy. It is our duty to see that the freedom which we have won for ourselves is extended throughout the Empire. But political freedom is not enough. We have learned that men may be politically free but economically in chains.

We have long ago given up the idea that we should enrich ourselves at the expense of our overseas possessions, but we have to do more than this. We have to pursue a positive policy of raising the standard of life throughout the British Empire. In many races which are classed as backward there are great potentialities.

We must not rest content with leaving things as they are, we must endeavour to bring to all the peoples within the empire the economic advantages which science now makes possible. We must assist our fellow subjects to progress in the scientific development of the lands in which they dwell. The white races have not a monopoly of industrial ability. It is certain that in Africa as in India we shall find industries growing up. At one time we might have feared that these would compete with our own industries.

We must realise that an increasing standard of life all over the world would mean an increased demand for the commodities which we can produce.

It may be that in our colonies goods which we formerly produced will now be made there, but this will not ultimately be to our loss, for it is part of the process which has been going on for many years whereby the older industrial countries, such as our own, turn from the production of simpler commodities to the production of more advanced.

On the grounds of self interest alone we must desire a levelling up of living conditions all over the world, but there is more than this to be considered. Quite naturally the yellow, brown and black races will increasingly ask why they should be permanently kept at a lower standard of life than the white. We who have fellow citizens of so many different races must be concerned to remove inequalities which may lead to strife.

We see to-day two rival creeds, the Nazi creed which asserts that the Germans are the master folk who should enjoy the good things of the world while other races should be kept down for their benefit, and the democratic creed which rejects this conception and proclaims the value of every individual human soul whatever his colour.

I believe that this democratic view of society is derived from the principles of Christianity and that the creed of the Nazis is essentially the creed of Anti-Christ. I hold, therefore, that in this war we are fighting the battle of good against evil, and that in proclaiming our faith in democracy we are living up to the principles of the founder of Christianity.

But remember that democracy is not an easy system. It may be destroyed from within as well as from without. It is not a method of Government but an attitude towards life. It demands not just acquiescence but a constant active striving.

This is what I would impress on you to-night that the battle for the things of the spirit will not end with the defeat of Germany or of Japan. It must be fought all the time. We are engaged on a great adventure, a pilgrimage in which there are moments of relaxation but only moments. For if we cease to go forward we go back.

I know how heavily the strain of war presses upon all of us and how great is the temptation to look forward to a time when we can relax, but I warn you that there is the danger. Unless we carry into the days of peace the high spirit of adventure and sacrifice which has been displayed in war, we shall lose what we have won, the work will have to be done again and we shall have betrayed those who have died for us.

/Beware of

Beware of complacency, beware of seeking just for security, beware of setting before yourselves a low and materialist ideal. Civilisation has nearly in these days suffered shipwreck, not because of the power of its enemies, but because of the slackness of its defenders.

Let us never again take 'safety first' for our watchword, but let us have faith that victory is to those who are prepared to take risks and that, to achieve the victory of man's spirit over the dangers that beset it, we need courage and faith to dare and dare and dare again.

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