

Nehru and the New Commonwealth
Eighth Lecture - by Sir Harold Wilson
2 November 1978

In accepting the honour of being invited to give the annual Nehru Memorial Lecture I do not have the advantage of most of those who have gone before me. Unlike Lord Butler and Krishna Menon, I was not born in India. Unlike some who have delivered the lecture, I did not know Nehru in the long years of struggle towards Independence. I did come to know him quite well through his visits to Commonwealth Conferences when I was a member of Clement Attlee's Cabinet. I remember those conferences to which you referred, 1948 and 1949, following which the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi ratified the declaration of the Prime Minister announcing India's adherence to the Commonwealth of Nations. In those days the Commonwealth Conference did not meet in the spacious surroundings of Marlborough House or Lancaster House, but round the cabinet table in Downing Street, with plenty of room not only for Prime Ministers but Foreign Ministers and officials as well. I remember the one I attended when first Nehru was there. There were nine nations represented there, including Southern Rhodesia which, while not technically and juridically independent, had a great measure of autonomy except in foreign affairs.

Impressions of Nehru and Krishna Menon

The Commonwealth Conferences I chaired as Prime Minister in the 1960s rose in number from 21 attenders to 36. The last one I attended in Jamaica in 1975 was attended by 33 countries, Nehru being absent, and since then two new hitherto dependent territories qualified for membership of the Commonwealth. And I am happy to say that during my nearly eight years as Prime Minister thirteen countries within the Commonwealth achieved full status.

In those two conferences thirty years ago, I can remember the quiet power, touched with magnetism, that Nehru exercised in our discussions. Naturally many of his contributions related to the problems of Asia—external threats to the peace of Asia. But he played as full a part in discussions of problems affecting some or all of the five continents as any other delegate. Outside the conference I had a number of talks with him on trade between Britain and India, but also he was passionately interested in that year to know about the Soviet Union which I had visited three times—in all spending three months there, in 1947, to negotiate the first big Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement. A great leader of his people, he was in every sense a good Commonwealth man. Had he lived there is no doubt that he would have exerted a still greater influence, not least during the traumatic effect on the Commonwealth and the free world of events in Southern Africa.

It was my regret that I was never able to be on a Prime Minister to Prime Minister relationship with him. He died just five months before I became Prime Minister for the first time. The Commonwealth Conference was just about to take place under the chairmanship of Sir Alec Douglas-Home, and India was represented on that occasion by Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, who was still in mourning for her father. Although she attended every plenary session of the Conference, she did not feel able to attend any of the lunches or dinners or other gatherings held outside the conference itself. Only once during that visit did she go out to dinner. Aneurin Bevan and Jennie Lee had been great admirers and friends of Nehru and of Indira. Aneurin died in 1960, but Jennie did succeed in persuading Indira to come out for a small dinner with friends, which I had the privilege of attending. It was certainly not a festive occasion in any way. She was suffering deeply.

I referred to Nye Bevan just now. He had been for years a passionate supporter of Indian independence, which never looked like becoming a reality until Clement Attlee became Prime Minister. Both Nye and Jennie, who loved India, were devoted supporters of Nehru and travelled widely throughout the sub-continent. In his biography of Nye Bevan,

Michael Foot gives an account of Bevan's first visit in 1953 on the invitation of India's Health Minister—Nye having been, of course, the minister who set up our National Health Service. When Nye addressed the Indian Members of Parliament in Delhi, he commended India's role at the United Nations and the Indian Government's initiative in seeking the way to peace in Korea. His second visit was in 1957, in the post-Suez situation, India having taken the lead in the United Nations against Britain's adventure.

My own personal connection with India and Nehru was largely due to yet another who delivered this lecture before me, Krishna Menon. I first came to know Krishna through Beveridge, with whom I used to work. Beveridge used to describe Krishna as the perpetual student, because long after he had finished his academic course he remained on year after year at the London School of Economics. Whether Beveridge knew it or not, and I suspect he did, Krishna was in fact using the School as his base, and just perhaps doing a little odd work from time to time, while exerting his influence in every possible way towards India's independence.

Krishna was High Commissioner during my tenure at the Board of Trade and he used to come regularly to see me on official business. But our friendship developed and went far beyond official business. I shall always remember attending an OEC Conference in Paris in 1951. Just before the Conference ended in Paris and I had an evening dinner engagement, I got a telephone call. It was more a *cri de coeur*—those of you who knew Krishna will understand what I mean—from Krishna. It was his last night in London on relinquishing the High Commissionership and he insisted on my spending it with him. Well, I flew back, but naturally I saw him again many times in subsequent years until his sad death in 1974.

Churchill and Atlee

Had Churchill won the 1945 general election, as most people, even the Labour Party, expected him to, the whole history of India could well have been different. There would, I think, have been no agreed independence in 1947. India would have won independence certainly, in the end, but perhaps only as a result of bloody fighting and possibly the malevolent intervention of unwelcome powers from outside. Indeed one might equally well ask, thinking of Churchill, whether the whole history of Europe and the world might not have been different but for his obsession about India. When the Baldwin government of 1924-29 was defeated in the 1929 election and Labour formed a minority government as the biggest single party, Churchill at that time was riding high. He had been Chancellor of the Exchequer for nearly five years. He had introduced five budgets, some of them highly imaginative. His only strong rival was Chamberlain, who had built up a great reputation for himself in housing and local government reform, and rightly. Churchill was at that time the more powerful. Baldwin in opposition, with the Labour Government taking a fresh interest in Indian problems, rejected the idea of all-out opposition to the MacDonald government's policy of limited reform in India. But Churchill resigned from the Shadow Cabinet to head the fight politically in the country. Baldwin at that time was under the most vicious press attack in history from Beaverbrook and Rothermere. That was when Baldwin talked of power without responsibility, the prerogative of the harlot through the ages, a phrase that he owed to his cousin Rudyard Kipling—someone else with a great Indian connection. Churchill to his credit did not make common cause with Beaverbrook and Rothermere, but for all practical purposes he had broken with his party, and it was on the issue of India. Because of that he was out of office through the tragic Thirties until war began in 1939.

The Conservative-dominated government which came in after the 1931 collapse of the Ramsay MacDonald administration followed the Simon Commission's report in providing a substantial measure of self-government, though nothing like autonomy or any guarantee it was leading to autonomy. And it was on this that Attlee was later to build. Attlee had been chairman of the various wartime committees on India which included a number of men of great experience. In addition to Leo Amery, the Secretary of State, Sir John Simon, John Anderson, James Grigg, Rab

Butler and Stafford Cripps. Churchill had sent Cripps, after his return from being Ambassador in Moscow, on a personal mission to India during the war. And one of Attlee's first steps on himself becoming Prime Minister was to send Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Labour's Secretary of State, with Stafford Cripps and A.V. Alexander, Minister of Defence, for several months, in 1946, to India for discussion with the Indian leaders.

After the failure of the Cabinet Mission Attlee had to decide on a more drastic policy. And his biggest problem was choosing the man to carry it out. Of course Lord Mountbatten was his own personal choice. He had come to the conclusion that it was useless to try to get agreement by discussion between the leaders of the rival communities. Unless these men were faced with the urgency of a time-limit there would always be delay, and as long as Britain held power it was always possible then to attribute the failure to Britain if there was delay through the quarrelling. Attlee said that the Indians must be faced with the fact that in a short space of time they were going to have responsibility thrust upon them. He did not think the chances of success were very good, but considered that Mountbatten might just conceivably pull it off.

The Cabinet, I remember at the time, welcomed Attlee's proposal, and he said he had found that Lord Mountbatten was in entire agreement with the line of policy it was intended to follow.

Both the appointment and the decision were, indeed widely welcomed, though the idea of a time-limit after which India would be handed over to whatever Indian authority might have been established did meet for a time with some opposition from the Conservatives, including John Anderson, who had been Governor of Bengal, All the same I remember that in the debates and divisions three Conservative members who had lived many years in India supported the Government. Obviously in the Commons there was a great majority in favour, but in the Lords the policy was in danger. It was a speech by Lord Halifax, rising right above party because his knowledge of India transcended that of the others, which saw the proposal through in the end without a division.

So at the end of that historic mission in July 1947 Attlee introduced the Indian Independence Bill into the House. It went through both Houses without a division and on 15 August, India and Pakistan became free and equal members of the British Commonwealth, with Nehru as the Prime Minister of India and Liaquat the Prime Minister of Pakistan. On 10 July 1947 Clement Attlee rose to move the second reading of that bill, and that speech is worth studying. It showed a degree of eloquence of which Attlee would not normally have regarded himself as capable, and he began by saying that he had it in command from His Majesty to acquaint the House that His Majesty had placed his prerogative so far as concerned the matters dealt with by the bill at the disposal of Parliament, And Attlee made an unprecedented request of the House, one never to be repeated in his whole lifetime. He had to ask the indulgence of the House for taking up more of its time than was his custom. But, he said, the theme was a great one, and in fact he spoke for 55 minutes—double or treble or quadruple his normal time for a Commons speech.

The bill, he said, brought to an end one chapter in the long connection between Great Britain and India but opened another. There had been many instances in history when states at the point of the sword had been forced to surrender government over another people, but it was very rare, for a people that had long enjoyed such power, to surrender it voluntarily. The nearest parallel was the action of Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal Government in 1906, when Attlee was working in Toynbee Hall in the slums of London's East End. He recalled that, just as India had owed her unity and freedom from external aggression to the British, so the Indian National Congress itself was founded and inspired by a Briton. Further, he asked that any judgment passed on British rule in India by Indians be passed on the basis not of what obtained in the past in India, but on the principles which we ourselves instilled into India.

Then he turned to the theme which, he said, had faced the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, the Simon Commission, the Cripps Wartime mission and the more recent visit of three Cabinet ministers. Everyone, he said, who had touched the Indian problem had been brought up against the same stumbling block. They all wanted to maintain the unity of India and to give India complete self-government, while preserving the rights of minorities within India. They all hoped that a solution might be found without resorting to partition. But, he said, it had become evident there was no alternative to partition. He hoped that the severance would not endure—that the two new Dominions which were about to be set up might in course of time come together again to form one great member state of the Commonwealth. But this, of course, was entirely a matter for their own peoples. He suggested the Commonwealth was so unique that its nature was still not fully comprehended. Many Americans, for instance, still did not understand that the Dominions were as free as Great Britain. They did not appreciate that membership of the Commonwealth did not detract from independence but, rather, added something to it.

There have been some strong attacks on the Attlee policy and Mountbatten's actions in India, the favourite word being 'abdication'. Attlee was nettled—he was not usually nettled by criticism, but on this he felt so strongly. It was not abdication, he said, but the fulfilment of Britain's mission in India.

Fourteen years later, and ten years after he left Downing Street, Attlee gave an historical lecture at Oxford, taking as his subject changes in the conception and structure of the British Empire in the present century. The lecture was on India, going back to Curzon and the Delhi Durbar, indeed back to the East India Company. His lecture ended with these words:

During these years, India has been fortunate in having as Prime Minister a very great man, Mr Jawaharlal Nehru, educated in Britain, a devoted follower of Mr Gandhi. He has the qualities required for the difficult period of inaugurating this great change; in particular by his wise toleration he has set a great example to the world.

That judgment was made by Attlee in fact after fourteen years of Nehru's premiership.

India did in fact opt to stay in the Commonwealth; Burma sadly did not. It was India's individual national decision, ratified by her Parliament, which in fact created the modern Commonwealth. Had Burma waited a little before deciding she might have found it possible to adhere; and it would be interesting to speculate, what might have happened if Ireland, also given independence by Attlee's government in 1947, had decided to join the British Commonwealth, though I will not follow that interesting speculation.

On 2 March 1949 the Prime Minister wrote to the King, informing him of a meeting he had had with Winston Churchill and other Opposition leaders to explain the new situation that had arisen as a result of India's decision to become a republic. He gave Churchill and the others a copy of a paper he was himself circulating to the Commonwealth for its forthcoming Conference, called 'India's Future Relations with the Commonwealth'. Churchill said he would consider this with his friends, and in the course of the short discussion that followed, gave it as his own opinion that it was most important to keep India in the Commonwealth. While fully agreeing that it was most important not to weaken the link of the allegiance of the Crown, he thought it should be possible to retain a republican India in the Commonwealth; and after consulting his colleagues he came back and gave Attlee his full support. He had come a long way from when he gave his description of Gandhi as a half-naked fakir, and a long way, too, from the time when he had broken, as I said earlier, from the Tory Shadow Cabinet to campaign against even a moderate advance towards Indian self-government. It was vitally important in that year that the creation of the new Commonwealth should have the support of the major parties in the House of Commons, and

Churchill's agreement with Attlee blessed the new conception with a firm spirit of consensus.

The Commonwealth Nehru made

But for the statesmanship of Nehru we might never have seen it, so if Nehru was the visionary who created modern India, Nehru was also the statesman who created the modern Commonwealth. When Lord Mountbatten proposed the establishment of the Nehru Memorial Fund, I was glad to announce that the government would contribute £50,000 to it. This contribution was a token of our esteem for Jawaharlal Nehru, the man and the friend of Britain, the architect of secular democracy in India and a world statesman whose vision so greatly assisted the creation and sustenance of the modern Commonwealth.

The British Sovereign became the head of the new Commonwealth and the present Queen's devotion to it is well recognized. No one has ever travelled so extensively in the Commonwealth countries of five continents. Without revealing any confidences, which would be improper, I can say that more than one Prune Minister has found at his weekly audience that, when some news has come in from a Commonwealth country, the Queen can speak more knowledgeably than himself about that country and its personalities.

Commonwealth conferences have not always been recognized by commentators for what they provide. I have attended several Commonwealth conferences, six of them as Prime Minister, chairing four, and rising from 21 members in my first as Prime Minister to 33 in 1975. The Queen visited Kingston in the royal yacht *Britannia* and entertained all the heads of state and government for dinner. We went out in a launch. We all had to be assembled for a group photograph, all of us looking very serious, some putting on, what we call in politics constituency faces, for publication back home—until Prince Philip said, in an aside to his wife which was heard all over the room: 'To think that the peace of the world depends on all this lot.'

A Commonwealth conference does not decide anything, it discusses things. It creates better understanding. Bilateral meetings on the margins of the conference are of no less tremendous importance than the plenary meetings. But the Commonwealth is not only a means of explaining policies and attitudes to one another and reaching, perhaps, a degree of consensus, settling some bilateral problems that have been hanging around at official level for too long. I remember when Commonwealth leaders met in London just after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, one African leader after another, one Asian leader after another, expressed his strong and violent criticism of the Russian action. To use a famous phrase of Churchill's in a different context, the Commonwealth emitted on that occasion 'one healthy growl'.

When I was Shadow Foreign Secretary under Hugh Gaitskell, I decided if I were ever to hold the post in substance, I would have a series of maps prepared, each centring on a country with which we had dealings, to see what the world looked like from that country's angle of vision. I had once seen in the Kremlin, for example, how different Russia's position in relation to her neighbours seemed with their Moscow centric map, which perhaps helped to explain some of the otherwise inexplicable persecution complexes that they sometimes show. Now I never got those maps, but in a different way the Commonwealth conference supplied them. They were looking at problems that we thought of in terms of a map of Europe from a different angle, while we were looking at their Asian or Latin American problems from our point of view. This was well illustrated when we were discussing together a very serious crisis that had arisen in the Middle East, and Indira Gandhi said: 'We do not call it the Middle East, we call it West Asia'.

Commonwealth conferences have increasingly come to deal with economic questions, though we have not always reached agreement. But at the 1975 Jamaica conference Britain tabled a very long, detailed proposal for an international commodity policy designed to avoid the poverty which hit many Commonwealth countries when prices collapsed. A countervailing

scheme was put up by Forbes Burnham of Guyana, calling for a substantial transfer of trade resources between the richer nations and the developing Commonwealth. Michael Manley, the Prime Minister of Jamaica, our chairman and host, said we should spin a coin to decide which of us should introduce his plan first. But since Britain had also made plans which would envisage such a transfer of wealth, since we were meeting under the shadow of the OPEC crisis, the two programmes went forward together with the blessing of the conference.

To conclude: Suppose in the last quarter of this century an international committee of wise men were appointed to draw up a list of the statesmen who should go forward to the next century as being in the ranks of the immortals, Churchill would be there as war leader; some would add Lloyd George. I would add Attlee, not only for leading the world with the welfare state but for giving freedom to independent sovereign states and moving a 200-year old Empire into the Commonwealth. Well, to each his nomination. But when my set of nominations is complete, four out of an otherwise very short list will be there for their several and unique achievements in the Indian sub-continent. My four will be Gandhi, Nehru, Attlee and Mountbatten.