

THE COMMONWEALTH CONFERENCE

BOYCE RICHARDSON

London Correspondent of the 'Montreal Star'

ON the afternoon of Tuesday, 14 March 1961, the Prime Ministers or Presidents of ten Commonwealth countries, having decided after two days of argument that the Commonwealth stood for equality among men of different races and colours, then invited Dr. Verwoerd to choose whether South Africa wanted to remain a member of such an association.

"It is now up to Verwoerd," one of the delegates told me that evening. "He can accept or reject."

What Verwoerd had to accept or reject was a communiqué which would have, in the first place, expressed strong disapproval of South Africa's racial policies, criticising racial segregation as irreconcilable with the ideals on which the influence and unity of the Commonwealth rests; in the second, stated Dr. Verwoerd's justification for these policies; and in the third, announced that after hearing the South African Prime Minister, the other leaders were still of the same opinion and believed that it must be an objective of Commonwealth governments to create a society in which there is equality of opportunity, regardless of race and colour.

Several Prime Ministers made it known that this declaration was final, beyond any further negotiation. Only one move was left in the game, and that was Verwoerd's. Yet even this last door was in fact a false one.

As the next day's events were to prove, the Conference could have only one issue; even if Verwoerd had announced his acceptance of the communiqué, this would have been unacceptable to most of the other delegates.

After two days of highly charged discussion, it was no longer possible to retain in the Commonwealth the architects of apartheid. No matter how strong the condemnatory words that were published, the only issue was whether South Africa stayed or went. Julius Nyerere had said clearly that to keep South Africa in was to keep Tanganyika out. No form of conciliatory denunciation could skirt around that challenge.

The Macmillan attempt to "find a formula" had collapsed. But it came perilously close to success. Fortunately, just as

agreement with Verwoerd seemed possible, the Prime Ministers themselves—including Mr. Macmillan—realised that they were on the point of making fools of themselves. At the last minute they could not quite stomach the hypocrisy of the formula that they themselves had reluctantly prepared.

For several months Messrs. Macmillan and Sandys had been rummaging around at the bottom of their tactical bucket to find ways of keeping South Africa in the Commonwealth. And it can hardly be denied that they had done a very skilful job. First of all, in order to give themselves and Verwoerd the maximum room for manoeuvre, they had brought the Conference forward—against the wishes of several other Prime Ministers—so that it should be held before South Africa actually became a republic. This was done—of course—because of the pressing matters of world importance that the Prime Ministers had to discuss.

And even if these pressing matters should allow the leaders to get around at last to a discussion of South Africa, certainly no vote would be taken. No vote ever had been taken at these meetings. Therefore there could be no question of the so-called “rule of unanimity” which had governed these meetings in the past.

The other Prime Ministers would doubtless remember that it was a cardinal convention of these meetings that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of member states. If apartheid were to be fair game for denunciation, so too was the imprisoned opposition in Ghana, the oppression of the Tamil minority in Ceylon, the Naga revolt in India, the military dictatorship of ‘basic democracy’ in Pakistan, the White Australia policy or Canada’s immigration habits.

Two months before the meeting, Macmillan seemed to have won an almost bloodless victory. Duncan Sandys had been off trumpeting around the Commonwealth about disarmament—“it is now certain,” reported *The Sunday Times* loyally on January 22, just after Mr. Sandys returned, “that disarmament will be the principal subject at the Conference”—and one by one the Prime Ministers seemed to be retreating from their determination to bring the issue of apartheid to the boil. The Prime Minister of Malaya was not going to insist if he were the only one . . . Canada was beginning “to have second thoughts” . . . Nigeria felt that no outside pressure would move Verwoerd . . . Ghana was strangely silent. . . .

Dr. Verwoerd came to London first, and in the most outrageous press conference given here for some time, he lectured the reporters and the world about the wonders of air travel, the delights of apartheid, his neighbourly feeling for the blacks, and his hope that South Africa's outstretched hand of friendship would be tightly clasped by all his Commonwealth brothers of whatever colour.

This produced a strong reaction among the other Commonwealth leaders; but even at this late date, there is no doubt that the British were feeling fairly confident all would be well. The first days were spent meandering along amicably on disarmament ("that paramount topic") and other matters of world import. The fourth day, Monday, had been set aside for "constitutional questions", and the British delegation still believed that South Africa's membership would be quickly approved, leaving the denunciation of apartheid to be discussed separately towards the end of the Conference.

President Nkrumah arrived after the Conference had begun, and admitted reluctantly to reporters that he was not planning a "show-down". *The Times* announced the next morning that South Africa's retention in the Commonwealth was now assured.

Anyone who had searched for the occasional grain of wheat through the mountains of chaff collected at airport interviews should not, however, have been quite so positive as the man from *The Times*. The Tunku had said that the Prime Ministers should "not give a blank cheque" to South Africa over her membership of the Commonwealth. Diefenbaker had said he would propose a declaration by which all member states would accept the "dignity, worth and equality of every individual, regardless of race or colour."

Dr. Nkrumah could not understand how South Africa's membership and the issue of apartheid could be discussed separately and clearly planned to insist on their being discussed together.

From all this it should have been clear, even to *The Times*, that whatever else happened, there was going to be an unholy row on Monday, 13 March. This was made even more certain by the arrival in London towards the end of the week of a cabled article from Julius Nyerere, threatening that Tanganyika would stay out if South Africa stayed inside the Commonwealth.

Nyerere's article—which appeared in *The Observer* on

Sunday, 12 March—was so cogently argued, so thoroughly in harmony with Pan-African, radical and indeed liberal feeling throughout the Commonwealth, that Ghana had little option but to toughen its stand. One newspaper on Saturday morning announced that Ghana would threaten to leave the Commonwealth if South African remained. By Sunday this was the weekend sensation, even though it wasn't strictly true. The careful round of talks at Chequers, the secret diplomacy, the urbane search for an elegant compromise all speedily collapsed in face of 1,500 well-chosen words on the editorial page of *'The Observer'*. The plug was opened that Sunday, and already a bathful of British diplomatic soft soap was gurgling down the drain. The bath took three more days to empty.

Dr. Verwoerd opened the discussion by applying for South Africa's formal readmission to the Commonwealth as a republic. He was supported by Britain, New Zealand and Australia who took the view that this was merely a constitutional question. Canada first suggested that no decision should be made until South Africa actually became a republic, but that in the meantime a declaration of principles, to include equality of the races, should be discussed. This was unacceptable to the Afro-Asian leaders, so Diefenbaker fell in with them; he announced that South Africa's membership could not be treated as a purely constitutional matter but required positive approval. The time had come to make clear what the Commonwealth stood for; Canada not only deplored the principle and practice of apartheid, but believed it was contrary to the principles for which the Commonwealth ought to stand.

Later, in the House of Commons, Mr. Macmillan said his view had been that South Africa should be admitted "on constitutional grounds", but that at the same time the "strongest disapproval" should be expressed of her racial policies. It is fair to assume that, with the support of the Australasians, he espoused this view throughout the second day's discussion.

What, however, did Macmillan mean by all this? Simply that Verwoerd had allowed apartheid to be discussed, that this was rather remarkably generous of him, and that it was up to the others to meet him halfway by expressing their disapproval of his policies in acceptable language. This was the search for a formula that would leave South Africa to continue imperturbably with her membership of the Commonwealth and her policy of race rule alike.

Some of the other Commonwealth leaders did not see the discussion in precisely these terms. "The whole purpose of the discussion," said Mr. Nehru at his press conference afterwards, "was that they should abandon or modify or vary apartheid to some extent. Otherwise why argue?" It is interesting to speculate whether Macmillan really understood that, when the other Commonwealth leaders talked of a declaration of principles, they were not searching for an acceptable but empty formula by which to save Verwoerd's face (along with their own), but were groping for a weapon which would force Verwoerd to change apartheid.

Certainly Verwoerd never understood the discussion in this way; when he came at one point to draft a communiqué that was acceptable to him, it said very little more than that the matter had been discussed. "The only thing he agreed to," said Mr. Nehru, "was that I should be allowed to express my opinion. That didn't take us very far."

Yet the battle must have been fought tenaciously; by the end of the second day, Nkrumah, Nehru and Diefenbaker had got even Menzies to agree to the declaration of principles. But the acceptance or rejection of this declaration was left to Verwoerd.

What would have happened if, on Wednesday morning, he had said, "I accept your principles, and will subscribe to them"? Or, "I do not accept them, and yet wish to remain a member"?

There was no sensible answer to this. Macmillan, however, had still not given up hope. The search for an acceptable formula was taken up again on Wednesday, and after a good deal more talk, the communiqué was practically agreed.

But the two sides, while using the same words, had been speaking different languages. The white nations had been looking for a way to mollify criticism of South Africa's retention; the "Afro-Asian-Canadian bloc" (to use Verwoerd's phrase) had been trying to prove that the Commonwealth could have some modifying influence on the South African government. When Dr. Verwoerd would clearly not budge an inch, they could hardly agree to South Africa's membership. Then, on the last afternoon, Verwoerd made it clear that any agreed declaration was to be the end for all time of Prime Ministerial discussion of apartheid. This was surely the moment—and splendidly dramatic it must have been—when the realisation dawned on the other Prime Ministers that this Afrikaner who refused to exchange diplomats with them, whose pale eyes gleamed as he

wove his fantasies about a Commonwealth of friendly nations living side by side in South Africa, who dismissed all opposition as Communist agitation or malicious prejudice, who believed in his righteousness with a fervour that put him outside the reach of reason and discussion—this man was not one of them, and never could be.

Nehru then said that of course the battle against apartheid would be continued outside the conference room, and he would be happy to lend himself to that battle. Nkrumah announced that Ghana certainly did not consider the matter finished. Ghana, in fact, reserved its attitude both to its own continuing membership of the Commonwealth, and to South African membership.

Verwoerd then said that he had been perfectly reasonable, but that the others were being vindictive. Much to the relief, no doubt, of the others (except Menzies), he withdrew South Africa's application.

No one, said Mr. Nehru later, had been vindictive; but certain leaders had stated in the Conference that the Commonwealth might disintegrate, and, said Mr. Nehru, "the letter published from Mr. Nyerere showed how that might happen."

Within a week Mr. Macmillan discovered to the House of Commons his belief that "a tragically misguided and perverse philosophy" lay at the root of apartheid. And Mr. Sandys, who only two months before had toured the Commonwealth to plead for Dr. Verwoerd's retention, now admitted that it had been a waste of breath to ask the South African Government to change its racial policies.

In one of those marvellously bland switches of line which are the breathtaking and peculiar talent of the British Tory, Mr. Sandys said that what had happened would increase "the unity and moral standing of the Commonwealth throughout the world.

"I am determined to refute with all the power at my command the allegation that the Commonwealth is going to disintegrate," he said ringingly. What had happened was, he said, "sooner or later, inevitable."