How easily the words come together on our lips: ‘Britain and the British Commonwealth’. The idea for which they stand is comfortable and familiar: the fact to which they refer, solid and comforting. We feel differently about our relations within the Commonwealth and those we have with the rest of the world. When we deal with the other members of the Commonwealth we are dealing with our own family. They are tied to us by kinship or long association. We understand each other: we get on: we settle things within the family. There are differences: what family is without them? But they are not allowed to disturb our mutual understanding.

Reassuring, Friendly Club
Most of us, I think, have felt rather like this in recent years. After all, the Commonwealth has grown out of our own history, out of ourselves and our activities in the world. There is a natural affinity between us all: there is a continuity which has not been broken by the quick growth of independence. The Commonwealth is a reassuring, friendly club to which to belong.

I suggest that this attitude is based on half-truths, and is, therefore, misleading and dangerous. It leaves out of account the most striking characteristic of the Commonwealth today, that it is a great political experiment of the most challenging and unfamiliar nature. Never before has there been anything like it in the world. First of all, the great combinations of peoples which history has known have been based on fear or force. There are many cases where fear of another power has induced an alliance or confederation. There are many where the force exerted by one nation has compelled others to obey its will and work in combination with it. Neither fear nor force unites the Commonwealth. It is built on the positive foundation of mutual advantage and consent. The experiment is as recent as the sovereign independence of the member nations.

Secondly, one of the great tides in world affairs is the ebb of the political power and influence of the west from the east. All through Asia new nations have been coming into existence—nations sensitive of the least hint of interference and suspicious of the good faith of the west. Division has come in place of domination, a division no less important to the future of the world than that between the communist bloc and the free peoples. The British Commonwealth alone has bridged this gulf and built a highroad across it. Whenever I stand back and look at this, not in terms of historical development but in terms of the world today, it seems to me an astonishing experiment, challenging the whole trend of things, as constructive as it is bold.

But we have to see the Commonwealth and our position and relationships within it as they are. For here we have the fundamental condition of our continuing greatness: by
itself it is not enough but it is basic. Without the Commonwealth we cannot continue as a Great Power and the continued existence of this great experiment is not guaranteed or secure: it has to be achieved, and by far the greatest responsibility rests on us. Little argument is needed to show the necessity of the Commonwealth to Britain’s continuing greatness. It is a truth which the British people have intuitively perceived: they do not require a demonstration. What is this small island, with its 50,000,000 inhabitants, if it has to ‘go it’ alone? It is one of two things, an off-island of Europe or an off-island of the United States of America. In either case our destinies would be decided on the mainland, on the continent of Europe or in the continental United States. If we were to maintain a standard of living anything like that we now enjoy, and have any voice in our own future, we should find ourselves forced in the long run to coalesce ever more closely with one of the continental systems. We should face absorption into Europe or becoming in effect a dependency of the United States.

The British people have reached definite opinions on singularly few of the great issues that have confronted their country since the war. But on these matters they have made their views known with absolute clarity. They do not want to become absorbed into Europe; they do not wish to live in dependence on the United States. All the more reason, then, for making a success of the Commonwealth. This is the relationship which enables us to play in the big league with the continental powers. It is success here which permits us to stand Out of the queue and fill the role of a Great Power; which gives us reasonable independence among our friends and a part in the great decisions. This is why it is vital that we see the Commonwealth and Britain’s job in it as clearly as we can.

I myself began to see all this a little more clearly while I was Ambassador in Washington. So I think the best thing I can do is to take some of the things we all know about the Commonwealth and illustrate from my experience how they came alive for me and the difference my new perspective made.

The nations of the Commonwealth are free and equal: they are all sovereign states. This was impressed on me the very first day I arrived in Washington. There was a group at the station to welcome me. It included the Chief of Protocol from the American State Department, British Embassy staff, and seven Commonwealth Ambassadors. I suddenly realised that there were already six representatives of His Majesty in Washington, as well as the Indian Ambassador whose Government recognised the King as Head of the Commonwealth. From one point of view, and it was a real one, I was the junior Ambassador of His Majesty in the United States.

I have another recollection. You will remember the visit paid to Canada by Princess Elizabeth with the Duke of Edinburgh before she became the Queen. The Princess was invited by the President of the United States to come to Washington. At first I assumed without thought that a British Princess was coming: but my distinguished Canadian colleague, the late Hume Wrong, made it clear to me that in Canada the Princess was a Canadian Princess and in Canada’s view a Canadian Princess would soon be crossing the border. I realised, as I had never done before, that the Princess was not only a Princess in the United Kingdom, but also the Princess of six other countries.
A Positive Independence

The members of the Commonwealth are independent nations: we all know that. But before I worked with the other Commonwealth representatives in Washington my ideas about this independence were rather negative. I knew the other members were no longer dependent on Britain—they were free to decide whether to stay in the Commonwealth or not. But now I learned that this independence had a very positive character. The other members each had their own foreign policy, political and economic. Canada, Australia, India, or Pakistan: the Government of the United States listened with great attention to their views. At different times these nations exercised real influence in the formation of American policy. In fact, Britain belonged to a club, each member of which was positively shaping its own destiny.

I was interested to see that the special correspondent for The Times on the royal tour formed much the same general impression about Australia. He wrote:

The war and its aftermath have transformed Australia’s isolation at the end of the world into a lively international concern, especially with the affairs of Asia, where many diplomatic posts have been manned that did not exist before 1939. Canberra, indeed, is the centre of intensive diplomatic activity, and the old American quip that nations of the British Commonwealth regularly ‘wrote home to mother’ but rarely to one another could no longer be made at the expense of the Australian foreign service, which has become a prolific letter writer to all the relatives, none more than to Canada.

Again, we all know that the Commonwealth is a unity. But in Washington I saw how that unity worked. Every fortnight, except in the summer, the eight Ambassadors of the Commonwealth met in our Embassy to exchange views and consult informally together. We discussed everything: the movement of affairs in the world, the latest phase of American policy—and the opinions of our different countries about them. We did not mince words. Even difficulties between individual members, like Kashmir, were regularly talked over by all of us, including India and Pakistan, with conviction but without heat. Further, the discussions took place between like-minded people who shared a common political tradition. No one had to insist on the freedom of his country because nobody ever questioned it. We had a common approach. We accepted common standards. We had forbearance, which is essential between members of a continuing club when they differ.

What did I get out of this experience? A new view of the power and positive influence of the Commonwealth countries in the world. A better conception of what the equality and independence of our partners means to them and to us. I could see that any notion of Britain as a mother with a number of sons, now all legally of age but still a trifle undergraduateish in outlook, is totally mistaken. We are dealing with equals. They expect to be consulted on matters of common interest before we act and not told about it afterwards. If we forget for a moment and act in terms of an older relationship, the reminder that we get is quick and unambiguous. It is because these truths have been applied by us at recent Commonwealth Economic Conferences that they have been so successful. This was particularly so with the conference at Sydney, although, in the opinion of those who took part, its constructive quality and success were matched only by the dullness of the final communiqué.
Shared Institution
But all this is a static analysis of the Commonwealth. It gives no clue to why it works or what are the factors which can hold it together and make it work in the future. What is it, in the expressive American phrase, that makes the Commonwealth tick? The backward glance of reminiscence suggests that the clue is to be found in common origins and common history. Some nations of the Commonwealth are linked to Britain by kinship, others by long association, all by sentiment. Above all, there is the Crown embodying the principles of continuity and unity within the Commonwealth and as such accepted by all the partners. For most of them it is more. It is a shared institution, standing high above the waves of change and political controversy.

These are high arguments. No one who followed the royal tour of the Queen and her Consort can doubt the supreme importance to the Commonwealth of the loyal affection which centred on the Queen wherever she went. But there is no disloyalty in saying that this alone is not a full explanation of what makes the Commonwealth work. The mistake would be to expect more of the Crown than can possibly be given. And much the same holds good of the ties of sentiment, real though they are, and the facts of kinship and contact from which they flow.

Aristotle thought happiness the crown of all human activity. Yet he likened it to the bloom on the cheeks of youth. It was, so to speak, a quality which supervened on others which were prerequisite. So the theologians thought of grace as the perfection of nature: it supervened on the natural activities of man as a quality of a higher order. Common origins remembered, ties of sentiment, the Crown itself are all higher-order links within the Commonwealth. If they are to exercise their strong influence, they presuppose what I am going to call, rather clumsily, first-order links.

What are these? They are economic and political: links of mutual advantage, necessary for the successful working of the Commonwealth though far from sufficient to give it its peculiar strength and quality. And yet these links of economic and political advantage are strong. Britain is a great natural market for the foodstuffs and raw materials produced by the other Commonwealth nations. Britain sends in return what countries actively developing their resources naturally need, manufactured goods and capital. In a prosperous year we export to our fellow-members goods to the value of near £1,000,000,000. But the political advantages are equally direct and simple; for the other members as well as for Britain. Each becomes more, has more influence on the course of world affairs, a more effective say in the great political and strategic issues of our time, more opportunity of effective action in international efforts to increase trade and raise the standard of living, because of belonging to the Commonwealth. The advantages are not one way: they are mutual. That is why they offer a basis on which to build for a long future.

What makes the Commonwealth work is a complex of motives, in which each element reinforces the others. The elements relate to very different qualities and needs in human nature. For this reason in combination they are both strong and supple. Perhaps that is why some people in our country go to an extreme. They realise that Britain cannot ‘go it’ alone in the present world: they see, too, that the prospect of her continued greatness is bound up with the Commonwealth. Why should not Britain make her great aim the strengthening of the Commonwealth, and in its ever closer unity find the full realisation of her inheritance? They have a vision of Britain and the
Commonwealth, friendly with all but dependent on none, finding together all the strength they need.

This may be an attractive picture. I shall not stop to argue that. The point is that things cannot turn out that way. This is certain: it is not a matter of opinion. The first proof is in the existence of the Atlantic Pact, acclaimed the corner-stone of our defence by Conservative and Labour Governments alike. Two members of the Commonwealth have thought it right and necessary to combine for the purposes of mutual defence with the United States across the Atlantic, and western European nations across the Channel. The combination is long-term, not short-term. In this divided and dangerous world Britain and Canada know that their fortunes are bound up with those of nations outside the Commonwealth.

It is worth taking the matter a little further. I am clear that a policy of going it alone would split and destroy the Commonwealth, if it were ever submitted seriously for decision. It would be unacceptable to both the Asian and the western members. In the last few years it has been obvious that India is devoting sustained effort to cultivating friendship with its far-eastern neighbours. India would accept no proposal or commitment which would prevent or limit this broad policy. And Pakistan has links which it hopes to strengthen with the Moslem peoples of the Middle and Near East. Any proposal likely to thwart a natural ambition to become the leader of a group of middle-eastern states would not be entertained.

Equally, the western members would never consent. Think of Canada in relation to the United States: 3,000 miles of frontier, a population about equal to that of New York State, common defence problems, strong ties in finance, trade, and industry, an old enduring and reciprocated friendship. Think of American participation in the development of Canadian oil and the iron ore of Labrador, the joint interest in the St. Lawrence Waterway. The future of Canada, while all her own, must be linked to that of the United States.

Then there is the attitude of Australia and New Zealand. They could not do without their Pacific neighbour, the United States: they have said so in the Anzus Pact. This pact is new. Let us be frank: it has surprised and pained many people in Britain that Australia and New Zealand should enter into such an understanding with the United States but without us. This is precisely the sort of issue in Commonwealth affairs which we need to look at with eyes unclouded by older memories.

In 1950 the North Koreans launched their deliberate attack. Nations whose strategic interests lay immediately in the south Pacific had to revise their ideas. At the same time a liberal peace treaty was being negotiated with the Japanese who less than ten years before had fought their way to the outskirts of Australia. Australians and New Zealanders both felt a new urgency about defence. They remembered the Second World War and the collapse of preconceived defence plans when Singapore fell. It was the American armed forces which checked Japan. Australia and New Zealand saw that the first power in the Pacific was the United States. When the Korean War made prospects across the Pacific uncertain and insecure, it was natural for these two Pacific members of the Commonwealth to enter into understandings about the common defence with the United States. The Anzus Pact acknowledges a vital strategic relationship.
Relations with Our Neighbours
The other nations of the Commonwealth are in the same case as Britain. Our future, like our past, is bound up with that of our neighbours in Western Europe and the United States. The evidence of two world wars and of the Atlantic Pact is final. The strength and vitality of the Commonwealth does not lie in the separation of its members from their neighbours. It is not that sort of exclusive club. It is its nature to reach out, not to retreat like a snail into its shell. Rightly conceived, the connections of interest and policy which each Commonwealth nation enjoys with its neighbours are a source of strength to the whole, not of weakness. They contribute to the effective working of the Commonwealth because they increase the understanding and the influence of each member in its region. And between them the members cover five continents of the world.

This then, in outline, is how I find myself thinking of the Commonwealth today. But the picture still lacks an essential part. The position of Britain and her function within the Commonwealth are in the last resort decisive, for she is its heart and focus. The strings of the Commonwealth relationship go out from her and return to her. She has laid down the conditions of the great experiment.

There is a danger that Britain, while having successfully avoided one trap, might fall into another. We have avoided the dangers of holding back on the equality and independence of our partners. When the old relationships were past, we have not fallen into the trap of still trying to impose our will. We have fulfilled the first, the negative element, in our role. The danger is that we leave things at that, and do not see our positive function. The second trap is that we can go on being so anxious to avoid the first that we neglect our duty to lead. The Commonwealth cannot get on and succeed without a leader, and there is no one except ourselves who can give a lead. What is more, this is expected of us. Ask anyone who has been at recent Commonwealth conferences: we are expected to take the initiative, and, if we are not ready to do so, the conference stalls.

We are expected to give the lead but we are expected to do so on merit. None of our partners is going to accept what we say on trust because it is what the British say or because of British prestige or British industrial power. We have got to take the initiative and do it so well that the other members of the Commonwealth welcome the British initiative and are glad to acknowledge Britain’s position as a good and effective chairman of the club’s activities. This is why the comfortable easy-going view of the Commonwealth we are prone to take is misleading and dangerous for us. If the great experiment, with all its constructive possibilities in the world, is to succeed, the responsibility in the last resort rests chiefly with Britain. We need to do things we do not particularly like doing if we are to play our part: we shall have to take thought and articulate some of the general aims of long-term policy: we shall have deliberately to take decisions and devote resources to the Commonwealth; we shall have to go on, as the British Government has been doing, working really hard at our job.

Exercising leadership in Commonwealth affairs does involve heavy calls on our resources, spiritual and material. We must also be clear about that. On the economic side we have to find money, goods, and ideas. Capital for our developing partners: goods to exchange for raw materials and food: ideas to keep policy about commerce
and currency moving on sensible lines. We have been and are supplying capital: but not enough. The target given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer was £300,000,000 a year. Our performance is a good deal short of that, and it matters, for the supply of capital is one of the links between Britain and the other members, and, if the link is weak, it transmits weakness to the other links as surely as, if it is strong, it reinforces their strength. It is very important that in the future the developing nations of the Commonwealth should not look elsewhere for most of the capital they need.

Again, we send great quantities of manufactured goods, but requirements are changing, and we have to meet and anticipate the change. Nowadays part of the definition of nationhood is industrial development. The other members of the Commonwealth are no exception. They are industrialising themselves as fast as they can: at times almost faster than they can afford. But they will not stop: it is part of being free and equal, independent nations. As secondary industries spring up overseas, and primary too, the type of British exports has to change. It has been changing fast since the war. We have to build and sell capital equipment and complex long-lasting engineering goods, at a price, of a quality, with delivery dates competitive with our rivals in the United States and Germany.

We have to think out sensible policies for commerce and currency. In this lecture I will say only this. At all costs we must avoid clinging to outworn ideas. There is a current example of what I mean. A group of people in Britain, rightly seeing the importance of maintaining and increasing trade within the Commonwealth, advocate a policy of increased imperial preference. It is pointless to argue the merits of this proposal for the simple reason that it is out of date and has no chance. I am under the impression that we have raised the matter two or three times at Commonwealth conferences and have got nowhere. At the end of the last discussion the Rhodesias were willing, New Zealand reminiscent, Australia oracular, and all the rest opposed: Canada absolutely, on principle and on expediency, for it would involve living next door to a violently opposed United States; the Asian countries because the idea reminded them of colonialism and imperialism.

Beyond this there is the political side of things. In defence we have to continue to be a firm base able to give assistance as well as receive it if we are attacked. But, above all, we have to take views which are large and sane on the great issues which divide the world, the communist bloc, nationalist Asia and the future of colonial peoples. We have to show that in our relations with the United States we can combine firm friendship with frankness and evolve joint policies which do not entail our giving in where we should not. I believe, to sum up, that what will induce our partners in the Commonwealth to expect and welcome the leadership of Britain is the conviction, sustained by example, that we labour with intelligence and determination for the sanity of the world.