I would like to talk about nationalism, its extension into internationalism and what that could mean for all of us. First: what is nationalism; what value does it have? How are we to move beyond the emotions and prejudices, prides and loyalties, that gather around it, the responses to it which we learn in our cradles and which some of us will never unlearn until we reach our coffins?

One way of modifying national feeling and gaining a stronger feeling for the whole community of man might be to discover another planet which was inhabited and where the natives were hostile. The cynic might add that if they had learned how we conduct our affairs on earth, they would be bound to be hostile. An astronaut would then come back to earth from Mars or Venus and complain: ‘I was arrested and badly treated.’ He would report not as a Russian, or an Englishman, or an American, but as an Earthman. Then we would all get together and react vigorously: ‘You can’t do that to us.’ And ‘us’ would mean the inhabitants of this planet.

Nationalism can be a fine and noble thing; the love of a man for his own country and what it means to him. But political nationalism, the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state, can also be the strongest obstacle in the way of building world order, and in the way of the realisation of the world community. The first reaction of millions of people today to any proposals for more effective international institutions, for international control of anything, is: ‘This means that foreigners will be taking charge of our affairs.’

To turn from a hypothetical future to an actual past, I hope I won’t be considered subversive myself when I give the opinion that the most subversive anti-national document of modern times—far more subversive than Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto—was the Declaration of Independence by the Fathers of the American Revolution. In the 18th century, the idea that the colonies could not only defy the mother country, but form a federal society of their own, was considered not only revolutionary but quite impossible. When the colonies declared their independence in 1776, each became a separate sovereign state. It was realised, however, though there was strong support for the narrower, separatist idea, that there had to be a broader basis for viable freedom than this. It was James Madison, who later became President himself, who said: ‘If that were all that was achieved’ —he meant sovereign status for each colony—’it would have been worthless.’ To him it would have been sovereign fragmentation without any United States: the kind of thing, we are told in some quarters today that must persist in the world.

Things could easily have gone that separatist, sovereign way in North America in the 18th century. The British colonies were on the Atlantic seaboard. The French were in Quebec to the north and in Louisiana in the south. The Spanish were moving up from
Mexico, and the Russians were moving down from Alaska. A French victory at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham could have changed the history of the continent and perhaps of the world. If Great Britain had then acquiesced in French domination of the northern half of the continent, the two French settlements would have joined hands in the Mississippi valley, and there would have been a French ring around the American states. There would have been a Spanish-speaking state in the far southwest. Our continent would have become a microcosm of today’s world. It may well be, therefore, that Wolfe’s victory at Quebec not only made Canada safe for the British, at least for a time, but made the world safe for the American Revolution. So instead of all this continental separation, there was established what another American President, John Quincy Adams, called a ‘compound nation’, the United States of America. As Adams put it, “the war” taught our fathers that they had infinitely more to do than merely achieve their independence; that they must form their compact upon principles never before attempted on earth, including the principle where political communities now free could unite into a union under one government.’

What we have to do now is to extend that idea of a union of free political communities into a far wider international area than was ever considered at the time of the American Revolution, so that such national communities throughout the world will one day become part of a larger international community. The problem today is not the creation of new free states, but subordinating the sovereign freedom of all states to the necessity of peace, security and progress. There could be no more essential task, but there could be no more difficult one. Its very mention seems to take us into the outer space of unreality.

The Americans, after all, reached their goal of federation only after a long, hard struggle; and after one of the bloodiest of all civil wars 75 years later. Yet theirs was a union between states which had many strong bonds between them to begin with. The process will certainly be infinitely more difficult for states in the world of today. But then, too, the need is infinitely greater. Perhaps we should begin with another equally subversive declaration, suitable to the conditions of 1968, not 1768: that the peace and security of people must take priority over the sovereignty of states, that the compound nation of America must be extended.

The American Union and the rule of law within its borders were established by force. But the establishment of our international rule of law cannot depend on force. We have to do it by agreement; we have to do it step by step through international institutions. We may have only years, perhaps, not centuries, in which to succeed, and yet only the tentative first steps have already been taken.

But I should go back to the question I asked at the beginning and define my terms—especially what I mean by the word ‘nationalism’. I don’t know any word that has come to mean more different things to more people. Nationalism doesn’t necessarily mean sovereignty. The word ‘nation’ does not mean state in that sense, though this is the way it is most often used. Indeed, I often use it in that sense myself, thereby adding to the confusion that I now want to clear up. A nation can, of course, coincide with a state, and often does. But there can be more than one nation inside a sovereign state, and often is. Let’s not confuse a nation with a race, either. Race is a far wider concept, which denotes the biological unity of a group with certain physical characteristics. A race can comprise many nations and many states.
Once you begin to look for common factors which do determine a nation or nationality, you get into difficulty. Language is not necessarily a common factor: Switzerland has four languages, three of them officially recognised. Size has nothing to do with it: you can have a tiny state which considers itself a nation, or you can have the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the United States of America. Clearly defined boundaries don’t make a nation. You can have the boundaries of a nation inside a state, and a national group overflowing state boundaries. How many Chinese settlements are there outside China?

Economic interest is not a determining factor. A nation-state will often cling to a separate existence against its best economic interests. Neither is religion. But if a nation has a common religion, or a common language, that makes the sense of nationalism stronger. Perhaps the most frequently occurring factor is what I will call a common culture, but that word is often so elusive and hard to define that it is not always very helpful as a criterion. By culture I mean common habits, common traditions, common customs and, above all, a common desire to live together as a separate group, a communal society, with certain well-defined loyalties and objectives. Ernest Renan in 1882 described a nation as a ‘daily plebiscite’. It depends, he said, on ‘the consent, the desire clearly expressed, to continue life as a community’. So perhaps we should merely admit that we may not be able exactly to define a nation, but we certainly know one when we see it.

Nationalism is often confused by the presence of ethnic groups within states, but groups which are not nations within the definition I have given the word. Take the United States. It consists of representatives of practically every national culture, every national tradition, in the world. If the United States had encouraged the political growth or the communal cohesiveness of these separate cultures and traditions, they might well have fatally weakened the unity of the state. So the United States have deliberately fostered the idea of ‘the melting-pot’, with Americanism being taught, the Americanism of the people emphasised at the expense of every other tradition. In the United States, with a single language, the educational system can be, and has been, used as a powerful unifying factor. Yet where there is more than one language, education may work in the opposite direction.

In my own country, Canada, education is constitutionally in the exclusive hands of the provinces. One province of Canada, which is about 85 per cent French-speaking, uses education, and quite understandably and legitimately so, to maintain and emphasise a separate French-speaking culture, separate traditions and customs. But it is possible to combine this with education that makes for loyalty to the confederation of Canada as a whole. If we in Canada tried to impose the melting-pot theory of national development on all Canadians, we would not unify our country, we would destroy, it. French-speaking Canadians have been there, as a group, before English-speaking Canadians. They have maintained their separate culture, their separate language, their separate traditions, and they are not going to have these submerged in any melting pot; nor is it right or necessary to ask them to.

If in this world we cannot maintain the existing political federations, with unity on essential matters but with recognition of differences of culture and tradition and language—and even special constitutional rights—what chance is there in the future
of building up a wider international community where these separate racial, national and even political differences can be merged—not submerged but merged—in the community as a whole? From my own Canadian experience I believe that cultural and social differences inside sovereign states, as well as cultural influences from outside, can and should strengthen rather than weaken a modern political society in our modern world; that political unity, in other words, does not have to mean either cultural or social uniformity. It would be foolish and futile to insist that such differences should be eliminated in the interest of single sovereign political unity. It would be equally futile and foolish, I hope, in the international field to insist on the complete obliteration of national differences in the interests of international unity. National societies meet a deep need in people’s hearts and minds. It’s very difficult to become passionate about something that includes everything. So we have to find a way to reconcile the narrower, more intense patriotism with the wider loyalty. I think it can be done. I think it must be done.

Historical experience shows that a state can develop successfully with different national identities. The Scottish people are a national society. You certainly know a Scots group when you see it. They have managed to maintain, and very vigorously, their separateness inside the United Kingdom. They’ve managed to do more: they’ve even, some would say, imposed their separateness on other parts of the United Kingdom. Scotland, in that sense, is a nation. So is Wales.

It has been argued that Scotland and Wales would be nations in a more meaningful and satisfying sense if they were able to have more of the local institutions of self-government: if, for instance, they had their own provincial assemblies. That is not for me to say. But surely it is possible in a country like the United Kingdom to reconcile political unity with national individuality: to maintain a United Kingdom of separate and developing peoples. I certainly hope so for the sake of the bigger international issues we have to solve.

If those who believe in separate nationalities in this cultural sense insist that each nation must then become a separate sovereign state, in the political sense, where do we get? I know that if you encourage the awareness of national separateness in the cultural and social sense, you are bound to create in some people’s minds the idea that this awareness cannot be carried to its logical conclusion without political independence, too. But if this were accepted in all political societies, where would it get us? Would the people of Wales or Scotland be any better off if they had absolute sovereign independence than they would be if there were a Welsh or Scottish province or state, inside a United Kingdom where they would have responsibility for their own cultural and certain other forms of development?

Apply this extreme political separatist argument to India, and it would not only be the end of India today, it would be the end of any possibility in the future of uniting the sub-continent of India together in some kind of confederation. Apply the process to the situation in Africa, which is confused enough now: there are at least, so I am told, 6,000 separate tribes in Africa and each can claim to be a nation in this social and cultural sense, with its own tribal loyalty, its own language, its own culture, its own taboos.

In 1962 Mr Pierre Trudeau, my successor as Prime Minister of Canada, wrote this:
The state of India is a sovereign republic. Yet four languages are officially recognised there, not including English or Chinese or Tibetan or the innumerable dialects. In the state of Ceylon, there are three main ethnic groups and four religions. In the Malay federation, there are three other ethnic groups. The Union of Burma has half a dozen nationalities. The republic of Indonesia includes at least 12 national groups, and 25 main languages are spoken there. In Vietnam, in addition to the Tonkinese, the Annamites and the Cochin-Chinese, there are eight large tribes. If we were to look for nation states—that is, states with boundaries—established on ethnic or linguistic grounds alone, we would look in vain.

For my part, if the idea of political separatism catches on, I may yet be seen carrying a banner inscribed ‘Long Live the Union of free Brittany and Cornwall’ — in Celtic, I suppose.

It is interesting to apply the doctrine of nationalism, as I have been describing it, to the Soviet Union. Marxist Leninism, like the Bible, can, of course, be interpreted in any way which is desired by the interpreter at any particular moment. It can mean legally sovereign status for each Soviet Republic. It has in fact meant that Marx’s universal brotherhood of the proletariat, which in due course would become the universal brotherhood of all men, has given way to Holy Russia. Indeed, a strong case could be made for the assertion that under communism the Soviet Union has come closer to being a centralised state than anything that existed before within the same boundaries. Even though there is representation of different national groups in certain central institutions, and even though at every great Soviet display we see the separate cultural groups dancing and marching and singing their special songs in their own languages, there is complete subordination to the centre in all political matters. Complete loyalty to the Soviet fatherland is demanded on the part of all its citizens. If such a loyalty is given, it has been brought about in two ways: first, by education, largely through the Communist Party, and second, by stirring up the emotions of the great patriotic war against the Nazi aggressor, when every Soviet citizen was imbued with the idea that he was defending the sacred soil, not only of Uzbekistan, Armenia or Siberia, but of Holy Russia.

Nationalism is often associated with the struggle of un-free peoples for independence. There it can be a very strong and noble emotion. During the struggle for freedom the new feeling of nationalism and national unity can be stronger even than the old separatist tribal feeling. But after freedom has been achieved, the more restricted loyalties often become strong again. Nationalism is good when it leads to freedom. But it is less good when, after these people become free, it is used for a return to fragmentation; or, at the other extreme, to political or racial arrogance by the new rulers; to the forced and total cultural and linguistic integration of unwilling groups into a centralised state or to forced exclusion of others from that state. There is nothing to be said for these brands of nationalism. They lead to racial discrimination and arrogance, which can only be condemned in any society. We are all descendants of Adam and we are all products of racial miscegenation. Indeed, racial purity depends on where you start to count.
It was only a few years ago that we thought of Nigeria, the most populous of the new African states, as an example of what could be done, in the march to freedom, to reconcile tribal feeling with national development. It was a set-piece which was working well. So we thought; and then the whole thing seemed to be collapsing—because of fierce forces of tribal separation and tribal domination which had not been sufficiently taken into account when the constitution of the country was drafted. The hopes we had for Nigeria were so high that our present distress over what is happening there must be that much greater. And yet, if we do not have some kind of federal society in many of these new countries, what chance is there for them surviving as free peoples at all: because the fragmentation will go on and on until some tyrant ends it.

The civil war in Nigeria—and other Commonwealth troubles that have recently occurred—shows the drastic change that has taken place in the Commonwealth association in recent years. The Empire functions which I attended back at the beginning of my official career were rather like cosy little West End club meetings, where the prime ministers sat around the Cabinet table at 10 Downing Street with the officials modestly but importantly ranged behind them. One table was enough. The atmosphere was that of an old boys’ meeting. That day has gone: 29 prime ministers now sit formally, or will do in January, in a large room around a big table. Many of them have graduated, not only from Oxford and Cambridge, but from Her Majesty’s gaols, in order to take their places around that table. But because they have been exposed to the Parliamentary and democratic traditions of Great Britain, and because many of them went there to college or law school or public school, these men, now leaders of independent states, bring to the meetings a family feeling which is difficult to describe but still manages to exist.

There have been divisions between nations inside the Commonwealth, as bitter as anything in the UN. On more than one occasion in recent years, the Commonwealth might easily have broken up: over Suez, over Kashmir, over Rhodesia most of all. But it has not broken up.

How far that family solidarity can be maintained in the second or third generation of leaders, who didn’t go to a British school or college, I don’t know. Certainly the Commonwealth can’t be held together much longer on the ‘old boy’ sentimental basis that has been so effective. It seems that the Commonwealth is being taken less seriously in the world, not even among some of its own members. Yet the very difficulties of holding it together now underline the importance of doing so: because the Commonwealth in its varied, multiracial membership of free states does reflect the world in which we live. It’s a pluralistic political association representing, every tribe, every creed, every colour, every religion and every continent.

It is of great importance to show that this kind of association, of small powers and large powers, of former colonial states and former imperial states, can meet and discuss, and at times decide, together, even though there are no formal bonds, and some divisions, between them. I would like to think that such associations as the Commonwealth are stages in development to something more formal and united. But certainly if we tried to make the Commonwealth a more formal association now, with demands on its members, with a constitution binding on them—convert it into some kind of confederation, however loose—it would simply break up.
Yet if we can develop on this new multiracial basis a new kind of co-operation between free countries, each desiring to work with and help each other, we may be able to give a new and constructive functional expression to the old family feeling that once was strong. In doing this we will have modified separate and sovereign nationalities in the interests of a deeper feeling of international unity.

This modification is shown elsewhere in the growth of other and more formal international institutions which illustrate the increasing need for co-operation between states, as well as the growth of world opinion in favour of it. Sovereign states have accepted, even if not always very warmly, the right of such international agencies to conduct ad hoc, or even regular, investigations into their affairs. International inspectors now examine national books. If you want a loan from the World Bank, or if you want some financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund, they will send their men around, who look into your national accounts and into your national financial policies. If you want their help, you have to accept their criticism. Indeed, decisions that concern that most vital part of national sovereignty, your currency, as we know very well now, are no longer solely under national control. This kind of intervention is the price governments pay for the benefits of international assistance and co-operation—especially in the financial and economic sphere. But it would have been unthinkable 100 years ago, except in the case of colonies, or of course subordinate states.

International political investigations are more difficult to reconcile with national sovereignty, but on occasions they also have been accepted. I think of one occasion some years ago. The Nato Council agreed to a procedure by which three officials—British, American and French—were authorised to examine the defence programmes and the economic and financial resources of all the member states, and to make recommendations on the contributions of each member to collective defence, so that there would be a fairer sharing of the total burden. That was progress. True, the members accepted the recommendations only when it suited them to do so. This showed that the power of decision still resided, ultimately, in the sovereign nation-state. Yet our Nato experience has also shown that national decisions can be and are strongly influenced by the opinions and recommendations of persons not responsible to your own government but representing an international organisation, and that is quite a change.

In any rational analysis, we can surely now say that sovereign power, exercised through the nation-state, which came into being to protect its citizens against insecurity and war, has failed in this century to give them that protection. The rationale for change has been established. The will to make it has not.