

How to Keep Alive
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The Commonwealth of Nations is clearly impossible. Except for the colonial past, its 18 member nations—five white, nine black, four brown—have nothing, not even wealth, in common. They are divided by almost every possible denominator: color, geography, education, culture, nationalism, economic interest. And so, before each meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London, logical men quite logically predict its collapse.

They are always wrong. The Commonwealth not only staggers through, but it keeps growing. Since 1962, when Britain's attempt to join the European Common Market nearly brought down the house, three former British colonies in Africa have been admitted as new states—Uganda, Kenya and Malawi. As usual, the Commonwealth talks that closed in London last week were blunt, sometimes brutal, often divisive. And as usual, the resolutions were masterfully irresolute. In the end, little was ventured, little gained—but then little was lost.

Cheers & Sympathy. In a 4,000-word, all-purpose communiqué, so expertly equivocal that it could be unanimously approved, the Commonwealth ministers offered Malaysia "sympathy and support" against marauding Indonesia, cheered a projected peace conference between India and Pakistan, endorsed U.N. efforts to keep the peace in Cyprus. Turning to South Africa, which left the Commonwealth three years ago, they unanimously "reaffirmed their condemnation of apartheid," but backed away from an Afro-Asian demand for economic sanctions and an arms embargo: "It was recognized that there was a difference of opinion among Commonwealth countries as to whether it was right or practicable to seek the abandonment of apartheid by coercive action of whatever kind."

Toughest problem of all was Southern Rhodesia, where—to the increasing anger of the Commonwealth's African bloc—a white-supremacy government keeps all but 60,000 of the nation's 3,600,000 blacks from voting. Rhodesia demands Commonwealth status, threatens to declare independence and follow South Africa unless Britain gives in. The Africans argued that independence could be considered only after Rhodesia's Negro majority gets the vote, and, implicitly, control of the government. The British, hoping eventually to be able to win concessions from Rhodesia's 224,000 whites, played for time and got it. The 18 Commonwealth Prime Ministers suggested a conference to negotiate Southern Rhodesia's independence at some unspecified future date.

Bigger & Better. "A great conference," wrote the Daily Mail. "The Commonwealth has proved itself virile, interesting, real—and, above all, alive." The Commonwealth, added the Times, "is shapeless, unorganized, unstructured, anomalous, illogical. Equally, it is flexible, adaptable, pragmatic, useful. It works."

To make it work even better, after its fashion, the Prime Ministers decided to establish a Commonwealth Secretariat. To be manned and financed by all members, it will have no political powers, will serve instead as a clearinghouse for information—and help Britain's Commonwealth Relations Office plan bigger and better conferences. Most remarkable fact about the new Secretariat: its strongest backers were the African members, who for all their frequent nationalist fuming evidently find advantages in belonging to the club.

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