

THE OPENING OF THE 33RD COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, KUALA LUMPUR, 1 SEPTEMBER 1987

Mr. President; Excellencies; Honourable Members of Parliaments of the Commonwealth; Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy and honoured to be with you today on the occasion of the 33rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. Malaysia considers it a great privilege to host this Conference for the third time. We first hosted the Conference in November 1963 and again in September 1971. On behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia, I would like to extend a warm welcome to our distinguished guests, the Honourable Parliamentarians from the Commonwealth countries.

2. Yesterday Malaysia celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of its Independence. I understand that all of you joined in the celebrations yesterday. I do hope that what you have seen yesterday and also during your tours of the country would enable you to have an impression of multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysia which you are not likely to get especially from reading about it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. You have before you matters of importance to deliberate. These matters relate directly to the welfare of the countries and people you represent, their relationship with each other and the roles that they and their Governments play. This is in the best tradition of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association or the CPA and it is very commendable indeed. I wish you well for I am sure that only good can come from your meeting and exchange of views. The knowledge and experience gained cannot but help you to understand your own problems better and may even contribute towards their solution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. I am on record as being critical of the Commonwealth. I still am. But the CPA is somewhat different. The Commonwealth I criticize because far too often it did not live up to its name. There is nothing common about the wealth of the Commonwealth. Often there is not even a great wealth of understanding between us. Thus the rich among us frequently refuse even to understand the problems faced by the poor -- even when the problem is of their making. As the poor struggle to deal with these problems they are belaboured with carping criticisms for being not democratic enough, and so on.

5. But I am not completely right, of course. My officers often remind me of the help we and other poor countries receive. There is the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Science Council, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, etc. It would be churlish of me not to admit that all these help. That is why we are still in the Commonwealth despite our other disappointments.

6. The CPA is, as I said just now, quite a different body. It is without doubt of the Commonwealth but it serves the very useful purpose of spreading the role and practice of parliament in a parliamentary democracy. This is not to say that we cannot learn from other sources but the constant exchange of ideas and visits and intermingling of parliamentarians during the various conferences of the CPA cannot but heighten the perceptions of the parliamentarians of what parliament is all about.

7. It is important to remember that most of the members of the Commonwealth gained independence only a scant three decades ago. During the period when they were colonies parliamentary democracy was quite unknown. They were governed by bureaucrats with near absolute authority. There may have been Legislative Councils but the members were appointed and consequently were beholden only to the authorities. There as therefore none of the traditions, and the practices associated with Westminster.

8. Yet when these countries gained independence they were expected to suddenly practise parliamentary democracy. No allowance was made for the fact that they had little or no experience or training. From Legislative Councils where no opposition existed they were expected to take on the thrust and parry of open debate between the Government and the Opposition. It is a miracle that these countries manage to retain parliaments and to survive.

9. Perhaps it is the fact that they were able to borrow the traditions and practices of the older Commonwealth countries that saved them from anarchy. If it is, then we have to thank the CPA for enabling the borrowing to be effected. We all know, of course, that the CPA is instrumental in exposing and educating many a parliamentarian from Commonwealth countries in the intricacies of parliamentary practice and its traditions.

10. But the CPA, of course, does more than that. It holds conferences in countries of the Commonwealth. It also holds council or executive committee meetings in the smaller countries which are unable to host the big conferences.

11. A lot of people travel these days. But many countries are missed out because they are out of the way or are too small. The people of the Caribbean find little reason to visit South East Asia or the South Pacific and vice versa. But with membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association these places are visited and friendship and understanding is the result.

12. Malaysia is one of those countries which appreciates the friendship and understanding of parliamentarians everywhere. We are a multi-racial country. It is not of our own making. It was thrust upon us during the period when we were under colonial rule. Since Independence we have been trying to foster racial harmony. It is not easy. As an example the Malays are Muslims and eat beef but abhor pork. The Chinese are Taoists or Buddhists and eat pork. The Indians are Hindus and do not take both pork and beef. Theoretically, we cannot even sit down together to eat. But we do and we do it often. This clearly demonstrates that Malaysians respect each others religions, customs and beliefs, are able to

give and take and are also tolerant of one another. We, therefore, get on reasonably well.

13. One would think that the people who inflict this on us would appreciate this, appreciate the tolerance of the three major races in Malaysia. One would think that we would be helped. But no such appreciation is forthcoming. Instead, we read reports that some races are badly treated in Malaysia, that very soon there will be racial violence, etc. The fact that that very soon, soon passes by with nothing happening does not deter them. Soon they will report again that very soon there will be racial riots in Malaysia.

14. Your meeting here therefore is very welcome because you can see for yourself the truth and you will hear also the views -- both Government and Opposition. You will be able to judge for yourself. I am sure other countries in the Commonwealth who are the subject of such calumny would welcome the opportunity to put themselves on display, so to speak, for all and sundry to examine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. The CPA is, of course, not so inward looking that each country is interested only in its own image. We are also very interested in the fate of humanity in every corner of the globe. In particular we are interested in the struggle of the blacks in South Africa against the crime of apartheid and minority rule. Malaysia has been unequivocal in its abhorrence and condemnation of the racist white regime in South Africa. It was Malaysia which initiated the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth. And as early as 1965 Malaysia applied sanctions against South Africa.

16. We in Malaysia feel strongly that South Africa should be completely ostracised. The excuses that sanctions would hurt the blacks more than the whites have been disproved by the realities that we see today. The blacks are being oppressed, ill-treated and murdered even without sanctions. We are only prolonging their sufferings by our half-measures. The only answer is total sanctions and isolation. The CPA must urge the doubting Margarets from among the Heads of Government attending the CHOGM in Vancouver to resolve to apply sanctions now. Then and then only will the Commonwealth be meaningful. The few should not allow the many to suffer so much for filthy lucre.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

17. The CPA is a multi-national organisation. As such its discussions are multi-lateral. The greatest multi-national organisation of all is the United Nations. It was founded on the premise that all nations are equal and therefore have equal rights to discuss world affairs. However, of late, we see a tendency to ignore the United Nations multilateralism in favour of bilateralism or limited small groups.

18. If the discussions of these small groups do not affect other countries they are welcome to it. But in many instances the resolutions adopted at these meetings

affect adversely a lot of other countries.

19. A case in point is the Group of Seven rich countries. It is as a result of this Group's meeting that suddenly many poor countries have been made poorer. The exchange rates of different currencies have been manipulated so that suddenly poor countries find their external debts have been doubled and their export earnings reduced.

20. Poor countries find it difficult enough to handle banks which speculate in their currencies. But against the currency manipulation of rich countries they don't stand a chance. And when rich countries get together to rearrange the financial and economic affairs of the world to their advantage, poor countries cannot but be the losers.

21. We must return to multi-lateralism. Admittedly the United Nations is cumbersome and some members can be unreasonable. But it is still the only truly representative body of the countries of the world. It can be improved but it must not be by-passed. The CPA, itself a multi-national body, must support multi-lateralism as exemplified by the United Nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

22. I am sure that as your plane approached Malaysia you would have been warned of the extreme penalty for trafficking in drugs in Malaysia. Our law is harsh but we make no apology. Our youths are being destroyed by this scourge. We consider those who distribute drugs as their destroyers, their murderers. And it is as murderers that they will be treated. We thank all members of the Commonwealth for supporting Malaysia's candidature at the Vienna Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. Ladies and Gentlemen,

23. Malaysia welcomes you. We hope that your stay here will be both interesting and pleasant. Like most capital cities, Kuala Lumpur, or KL as we call it, is cosmopolitan and not quite typical of the rest of the country. Nevertheless, it has its own character. If you have the time and the inclination do visit other parts of the country especially Sarawak and Sabah, where you will see what is more typical of Malaysia.

24. My wife and I feel privileged to be with you this morning. We look forward to meeting you again tomorrow evening. Your charming ladies will come to Sri Perdana tomorrow afternoon for tea with my wife and I hope they will have sufficient opportunity of exchanging views.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

25. I wish the Conference all success and wish you well in your deliberations which I hope will contribute to greater friendship and understanding among Parliamentarians of the Commonwealth countries.

26. I now have much pleasure in declaring open the 33rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference.