

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
(PRIME MINISTER)

EVENT: THE COMMONWEALTH SPEAKERS AND PRESIDING OFFICERS STANDING
COMMITTEE MEETING

VENUE: PARLIAMENT HOUSE, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 06 JAN 1987

TIME:

Mr. Chairman;
The Honourable The Presidents of the Senate;
Honourable Speakers and Deputy Speakers;
Honourable Ministers;
Your Excellencies;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome the Presidents of the Senate, Speakers, Deputy Speakers, Presiding Officers and other officials to Malaysia. I am honoured to be called upon to address this gathering and to declare the meeting open. We are happy that Kuala Lumpur has been chosen as the venue for this meeting and it is hoped that it will not only be successful but it will also be an enjoyable experience for you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. As I have stated on various occasions, the Commonwealth must strive to achieve more tangible and meaningful results for all its members. While it is true that member countries have benefitted from programmes such as the Colombo Plan, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, the changed world scenario today demands that the Commonwealth adjusts itself to this new environment. Inability to do so may result in the Commonwealth losing more of its credibility and effectiveness as an organisation set up with noble and virtuous objectives.

3. The world we live in today and the problems we face are both complex and numerous. The concept of justice and fairplay, as expounded by early thinkers, have changed considerably and taken new dimensions as new and more brash forces make their views felt. The concept and practice of free trade, as we the developing countries are made to understand, have been eroded, principally by its original advocates. Generally what was insisted upon by the rich and powerful as the 'norms' for international behaviour and relations and adhered to by small and weak countries, have

constantly been violated by the strong as soon as the weak learns to benefit from these 'norms'. The economies of the developing countries are not only at the mercy of the industrialised giants but these economies have now been almost destroyed by the rich nations. More, these powerful nations have exported their vices which undermines the efforts of the poor to better themselves.

4. All these actions by the rich nations have made the developing countries quite disillusioned and almost helpless. Their attempts to industrialise and export their manufactured goods are obstructed by the walls of protectionism -- put up by the industrialised countries not only to protect their domestic industries but also to deny the developing countries the right to compete in the international consumer markets. New rules and regulations are imposed by the rich nations from time to time to frustrate the attempts of developing nations to gain entry into the markets of the developed countries. Yet at the same time the rich and the powerful subsidised the production of their primary products which are then dumped in the developing countries, thus displacing competing primary products from developing countries. One cannot help but conclude that the industrialised countries are deliberately denying the developing nations equitable participation in the world's trade. The Commonwealth may symbolize the end of political imperialism but there is reason to believe that the old imperialist nations have found a substitute in economic imperialism.

5. There is no doubt that much of the economic ills and problems of the world today are man-made and the result of selfishness. Consequently the solution to these problems requires human willingness and sincerity, particularly on the part of the developed nations. These economic powers must realise that as developing countries prosper they will become better markets for the manufactured products of the developed countries. There is no way whereby the developing countries, even if they industrialise, are going to produce all the manufactured goods they need. The Japanese, or even the Koreans and Taiwanese phenomena are unique. Even they have to buy certain products from the older developed nations. The other developing countries are not likely to reach their levels. Hysterical terms like Newly Industrialising Countries or NICs should never have been coined for they create fears which are not justified.

6. The question that comes to mind is what role can the Commonwealth play. Certainly the Commonwealth should not be just a comfortable old boys club. The founder members must exhibit their belief in it's raison d'etre by not forsaking the Commonwealth whenever it becomes embarrassing or it obstructs their economic interest. If they do this, they cannot really expect the newer members to go on subscribing to the ideals and spirit of the Commonwealth. It is the disillusionment caused by the actions of senior Commonwealth

members that have prompted Malaysia to institute a very careful study of the Commonwealth and its membership in the organisation.

7. From where we are, we see the Commonwealth having everything except wealth that is common to all its members. The wealth is in fact confined to a very few of us. We need not go into history and recriminate. But is there any reason why we cannot help those of us who are in dire need? Should we ignore their cries for help simply because economic considerations demand that we help the oppressor against the oppressed? Should we forsake them because we have found new friends and formed new associations?

8. One of the oddities of the Commonwealth is that the members are expected to have a similar democratic system of Government modelled after those of the original Commonwealth countries. The expectation is odd because prior to independence these countries had never experienced democracy. They were ruled by bureaucrats who never had to obtain a mandate from the people. The system was completely authoritarian. Yet at the stroke of midnight these new members are expected not only to take over the responsibilities of Government but to practice a very specific type of democracy developed in alien and distant lands where the situation is as different as black is from white.

9. The most minute deviation from this democracy would draw the wrath of the self-appointed guardians from across the seas. The hounds will be let loose. Sundry rebels and charlatans will be listened to avidly as they condemn the prevailing Governments. True, some tales of woe are real and need sympathetic hearing. But experience should teach us that new Governments which had successfully overthrown old despots are not necessarily better than their predecessors.

10. But what is happening in these self-righteous countries? While they condemn discrimination in other countries, they themselves practice the most blatant discrimination. They demand rights for minorities and races in other countries, which they are not prepared to give to similar minorities in their own. And they continuously instigate and encourage protest and disorder which they are not prepared to tolerate in their own countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. If the Commonwealth is to survive and remain meaningful, there must be a radical change in the attitude of some of the members. Alternatively we should declare that it is a social club of English speaking ex-colonies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. In September this year, Malaysia will play host for the third time to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) conference. It should not be taken as a measure of our commitment to the Commonwealth concept. We maintain an open mind while we do our assessment of the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, we pray and hope that we will be convinced that the Commonwealth amounts to something -- that wealth should indeed be shared and common. We are not asking for a redistribution of the spoils. But we do ask that no one take unjustified negative steps which will impoverish further the already poor.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. You have a heavy schedule ahead of you. Nevertheless, I hope you will also find some time away from your meeting room to see a little of Kuala Lumpur, if not of Malaysia.

14. With these words I now have much pleasure in declaring open this meeting and wish you all success in your deliberations.