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Prime Minister

EVENT: `We Must Work Towards A Global Commonwealth'

VENUE: United World College Of The Atlantic In London, United Kingdom

DATE: 21 Oct 1997

TIME: 6.15 pm

I have been asked to speak on "Asia's role in the making of the Global Commonwealth of the 21st Century.

2. Perhaps it is useful to be reminded, as we approach the new century, that we must do so with caution - in the knowledge that there are many reasons for pessimism and no grounds whatsoever for idealism built on the sands of illusion.

3. Perhaps it is useful to let history remind us that a hundred years ago, as the world stood a tiptoe away from the 20th century, so many were so optimistic about the incredible possibilities for the future of mankind. All seemed possible. A new century was at hand. Or so it seemed.

4. After all, since 1871, there had been no major war in Europe, the main manufacturer of global history, the centre of the world and of human civilisation. By the day, remarkable medical and scientific breakthroughs were being made. The fruits of technology, science and medicine were spreading far and wide.

5. Electricity was lighting the globe. Telephony was wiring it together. People, trade and commerce were moving almost as if there was a borderless world. If they had known of the word, the great thinkers of the period would have spoken of "globalisation" and of a force that would span the chasms, bridge the gaps, bringing countries and nations closer together in a single humanity.

6. From the vantage of the centre of the world, people were eating better. They were happier, or should be happier. They were better educated. Certainly, by the standards of the past, massive numbers of people were going to schools, advancing to universities. Literacy was spreading like wildfire. Rigid social stratification was eroding. Social inequities were narrowing. Dickensian capitalism was being replaced by a nicer, gentler and even more productive capitalism. Feudalism and all its trappings seemed to be losing ground, losing face and losing force. Greater egalitarianism. Greater cosmopolitanism. A new internationalism.

7. The great Age of Imperialism was settling down and was seen to be yielding great humanitarian returns, not only for the imperialist but also for the imperialised. The White Man's burden was being borne in every nook and corner of the world and the natives seemed to be responding well. Why, quite a few of them were even going to Oxford and Cambridge. There was fascination with China. The "Yellow Peril", as an idea, had not yet been born. Missionaries were everywhere spreading the word of Christ. The real Age of Reason to be truly in the offing.

8. From today's perspective, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, we know that the great optimism of a hundred years ago was most unjustified.

9. To be sure, some wondrous things have happened. It will not be long before Macau is transferred so that no part of mainland Asia will for the first time in many centuries be under the yoke of any outside colonial power. Thank God old fashioned political de-colonisation is now almost totally complete -- although many still do not understand to this day the enormous psychological and cultural costs that it exacted from those who were colonised. An as phenomenon has been seen in East Asia, which has brought massive material advancement to numbers of the human race such as the world has never seen before - - at speeds never before seen in the history of mankind.

10. But in the round, is it not a shame that the immense promise of the 20th century, so palpably felt a hundred years ago, was so frustrated and so perverted?

11. The 20th century should have been the century of peace, dedicated to the rejoicing of life. Instead, it has been the century of megadeath.

12. The 20th century should have been a century of prosperity, common and co-operative prosperity. Instead, it has been the century of megamiserery.

13. The 20th century should have been the century of civilisation and of the celebration of civilisations. Instead, at its end, so many especially in the North Atlantic's cultural core still cannot accept a culturally plural world.

14. Crass political imperialism may well be dead. But crass cultural imperialism is alive and kicking. Not only are apologies not made for cultural hegemonism, but sometimes, with incredible myopia, cultural hegemonism is touted as a moral cause and a holy crusade. People everywhere are being told what is right and what is wrong and how they should behave. They are punished for not doing as they are told. I pray that a few decades from now, well meaning and equally holy yellow men will not be descending upon descending upon humanity, telling them what is right and what is wrong and how they should behave -- and punishing those who do not do as they are told. Today, mutual respect has to be fought for in a politico-cultural ambience of fear, prejudice and hatred stirred up by those who believe that after the long war, a new long war is necessary or unavoidable - - because of the inevitable clash of civilisations.

15. In the 20th century, we could have done so much to abolish absolute poverty absolutely - - to wipe it off the face of the earth. Yet what do we find? Megamiserery such as the world has never seen.

16. I do not condemn the few thousand billionaires who collectively have more wealth than a few thousand million human beings, many of whom are on this very day starving to death or who are precariously perched on the edge of starvation. Don't get me wrong. I have the utmost respect for those great men of wealth who have built with their own hands the massive fortunes which they now command. This admiration, I am advised, is very politically correct. I am also advised that it is definitely not at all

fashionable to even mention the starving unmentionables. They are best left forgotten or relegated to the footnotes of the history of our times. But I confess that I am more than a little discomfited -- I feel deeply and personally upset -- when I think of the three billion inhabitants of this planet who have to survive on US\$2 a day, each and everyday of their lives.

Let me now turn to the megadeaths.

17. In this century, the Europeans fought two continental civil wars. Because Europe was the crucible of history, because Europe ruled so much of the world, Europe's civil wars became the first and second world wars for mankind. Eight and a half million soldiers and 13 million women, children and older men perished in the so-called First World War. Nineteen million soldiers and 20 million civilians perished in the so-called Second World War.

18. To the tally of megadeath in the trenches of war must be added the deaths on the altar of doctrines. Hitler and Nazism saw the liquidation of 17 million men, women and children. Stalin and the Russian Communists put to death between 20 and 25 million human beings. One to two million died from the doctrinal enthusiasms of Mao and Pol Pot. As many as 80 million lives have been sacrificed in the temple of doctrinal or religious fervour in our wonderful century.

19. Man's inhumanity to man had never before reached such heights. So far in this century, which has not yet come to an end, perhaps 175 to 200 million people have been killed in mass carnage of one kind or another. So much of the past. What of the futures?

20. History tells us that the nineteenth century was the century of Europe. Europe dominated the world. Much of the 20th century was the American century. The United States dominated so much of the world. There are now many, especially from that part of the world from which I come, who are convinced that the 21st century will be the Asian century.

21. They believe that the 21st century will not only be the century of Asia; Asia's turn to be lord and master. They believe that the 21st century should be the century of Asia. An Asian century will not only come to pass. It is moral and right that this should be so.

22. I am sorry to burst their bubble. I believe that the idea of "the Asian century" walks down the well-trodden path of darkness. And it is a mirage mired in an incredible swamp of arrogance. I believe that the Asian century will not come. The era of Asian dominance over this planet that we call "earth" will not dawn. What is more, I believe that we in Asia should not aspire to achieve it, or to allow a new hegemonism, even if it is "ours".

23. The age of imperialism is dead. The time for hegemony has passed. They must be buried. And their burial should be celebrated.

24. There must be no resurrection of imperialism, no touting of hegemonism, no glorification of dominance or domination in the 21st century. These things are immoral.

25. Imperialism is no less evil if it is Asian imperialism. Hegemonism is no more tolerable if it is Asian hegemonism. Domination is no less a blight if it is Asian domination.

26. What we in Asia must work for in the 21st century is not the century of Asia but "the century of the world" a single Global Commonwealth, which excludes no-one, which includes all of humanity.

27. This must be a new world characterised by liberte, egalite, fraternite at home and by liberte, egalite, fraternite within the comity of nations.

28. The Global Commonwealth of the 21st century which I speak of must be a new world populated by flourishing, responsible, productive and sustainable democracies distinguished by remarkable standards of human rights and by remarkable standards of human responsibilities.

29. It must be a new world made the more remarkable by the emergence of billions from the darkest pits of poverty. We now have the means to absolutely eradicate absolute poverty. According to UNDP statistics, less than thirty years ago, more than half of all Malaysians can now look forward to entering the new century with zero absolute poverty, practically no-one below the line of absolute poverty. The UNDP says that my modest country, Malaysia, has been the best poverty killer on the surface of this planet in post-war human history. If we can do it, the whole world can do it. Let me ask the most simple of questions: Why not commit ourselves to poverty's end? Why not make the 21st century the first century of mankind freed from the enslavement of poverty?

30. I believe that what we must also work for is a single Global Commonwealth which is more caring not only of each human being and of his prosperity but more caring also of the physical environment which must not suffocate him or burn him -- which must instead enrich his existence, nourish his life and give him the sense of wonderment on the bounties and the beauties of nature, which will cause him to marvel at the handiwork of God. Those who believe that care for the environment is a luxury which we cannot afford are wrong. In reality not caring for the environment is a luxury which we cannot afford. If we cannot launch the necessary global crusade to save the global environment at the dawn of the 21st century, the twilight of the 21st century will be dark. It will literally be pitch black.

31. Let me also stress that the Global Commonwealth of the 21st century must be a new world characterised by mutual respect, mutual appreciation, much greater consideration for the interests, feelings, values and ways of others.

32. I do not wish here to enter the debate on Asian values, which so many Westerners tell us so insistently and so consistently do not exist. So insistent are they that even the non-believers in Asia are beginning to believe that there must be something in it.

33. I will not comment on the fervent belief of so many south of Canada and north of Mexico that even though there may be such a wondrous thing as American values and American way of life, which everyone in their right mind (even in Europe) should aspire to, there is no such thing as Asian

values and Asian ways of life.

34. I will easily concede that there is still a very deal we must learn from the West. I will easily concede that many Asian values of today are under attack and may no longer be there at some future date as we continuously urbanise and industrialise, as the extended family comes under pressure, as "pop" culture undermines and subverts. I will easily concede that the present day values in Asia are not unique or the pure invention of Asians; a host are very "Victorian" values, which used to dominate Western cultures and which are to be found to this day in so many American and European sub-cultures which are trying to hang on to what they call "family values". I will not argue that because the big majority of mankind are Asians and because so many non-Asians share our values or are trying to hold on to these values that it is Asian values which are universal.

35. I will not defend those in power in Asia who are using the Asian values argument to justify terrible things that they are doing to their own people. I will concede that many Asian values are horrible and have to be killed. Indeed, I have personally spent a large part of my life trying to do what I can to kill many of the "Asian" values which do us so much harm.

36. But I have no compunction in arguing that Western cultural hegemonism is no longer acceptable. Western cultural arrogance is no longer acceptable. Western cultural myopia and stupidity is no longer acceptable. The attempt to impose on others what is so clearly inferior, so clearly immoral and so clearly unproductive, Asia will not tolerate in the 21st century.

37. The Global Commonwealth of the 21st century which I advocate must say that a clash of civilisations is an obscenity which we cannot accept. A barren co-existence of civilisations too is not tolerable. Why must differences merely be tolerated? Why can they not be relished?

38. Our new Global Commonwealth of the 21st century must be one that not only works on the basis of mutual respect. We must be a world civilisation propelled by a sincere celebration of civilisations; and because it has taken the best from what each has to offer, a world civilisation enriched by the feast of civilisations.

39. True peace is the sine qua non, the most essential prerequisite for human progress, the essential cornerstone of the Global Commonwealth of the 21st century which we must build. But allow me to concentrate my remarks on the second cornerstone: common and cooperative prosperity and on what I believe is the most important key to this co-prosperity: the mind-shift to "prosper-thy-neighbour".

40. In one of the most influential books of all time called "The Wealth of Nations" written by Adam Smith in the year the United States declared its independence, he stressed that one single force, (selfish individual self interest) will work incredible magic to produce the common good within an economy. Let me stress here the need to complement this invisible hand with "the invisible shoulder", the proposition that ensuring the prosperity of others will work incredible magic to produce our own prosperity and the common prosperity of the Global Commonwealth.

41. For much too long, whether we will concede it or not, whether we realise it or not, the doctrine of "beggar-thy-neighbour" has been the dominant paradigm. Just ask how we respond when we see others doing blazingly well. Survey after survey has shown that. when the choice is given between a situation where we are doing very well and others are doing even better and a situation where we are not doing so well but others are not doing as well as we are, the majority prefer the latter. They prefer not doing so well and others doing less well than themselves over doing very well but seeing others performing even better.

42. Just ask how much of our time and effort is spent pulling others down rather than rejoicing in their accomplishments and lending them a helping hand, putting another shoulder to their wheel.

43. And yet, helping others to prosper is the rational thing to do, in terms of one's own interest. If you help your neighbour to prosper, you will prosper along with him. You should be laughing all the way to the bank if he is laughing all the way to the bank.

44. The prosperity of our neighbours and their neighbours and of the global commonwealth is in our immediate and vital interest. They ensure the markets which we need for our exports. They ensure stability and peace. Poor neighbours, on the other hand are a source of problems for everyone -- for themselves and for us, because their problems will spill over. Rather than the rising of the tide of wealth and hope that will raise all boats, the rising waters of poverty will be a tidal wave of misery and deprivation that will sink us all.

45. In East Asia, we used to be at each other's throats. We held firmly to the hallowed traditions of enmity and hostility passed from one generation to the next, sometimes over a thousand years. We did our level best to beggar and impoverish our neighbours, to keep them down, perhaps very much in the way that you also did in Europe. It took us many centuries to discover a new way, to bury the "beggar-thy-neighbour" mind-set, and to put in its place the mind-set of "prosper-thy-neighbour". This is one reason why there is more than one dragon in East Asia and more than one tiger. This is why the entire region is populated by dragons, tigers and tiger cubs.

46. We have tried the "invisible shoulder" - and it works. We have fed off and grown fat on the prosperity of our neighbours. It has been a veritable feast.

47. Imagine the incredible power of the "prosper-thy-neighbour" invisible shoulder applied globally. Imagine how prosperous Asia will be if Europe is prosperous, if the old Europe of the industrial revolution is back -- vibrant and dynamic, growing by leaps and bounds. Imagine how prosperous Asia will be if all of the Americas is vibrant and dynamic, growing by leaps and bounds. Imagine how prosperous Asia will be if Africa is vibrant and dynamic. I hope I am making my point.

48. The other side of the coin is also clear. Imagine the benefits Europe can derive from a vibrant, dynamic and prosperous Americas, Africa and Asia -- from a vibrant, dynamic and prosperous global commonwealth.

49. I have concentrated on the idea of the Global Commonwealth of the 21st century which we all should aspire to build. I said at the very beginning that there are no grounds for idealism built on illusion. I most sincerely believe that my idealism is not built on illusion. All that I have advocated can be accomplished.

50. But to accomplish it, we would need a new Asia, finding its proper place in the making of global history and playing the sort of role it once played in the making of human civilisation.

51. Some Western scholars have estimated that in 1820, 58 percent of the world's total output was produced by Asia (Incidentally, in 1800, China still had the highest per capita income although it was shortly to be overtaken by Britain). One hundred years later, by 1920, the whole of Asia stretching from the Mediterranean to the Bering Sea produced not 58 percent but only 27 percent of the world's output. This fell to an abysmal 19 percent in 1940. Since then, Asia's gross continental product has been rising rapidly again. By the year 2000, in nominal US dollar terms, the NAFTA regional economy, the EU and East Asia will reach full parity, each contributing some 28 percent to the global economy. By 2020, it seems very possible that East Asia alone will be as big as the EU and north American NAFTA combined. The Asian Development Bank, along with many others, expect that by the year 2025, Asia will produce not quite 58 percent but a close 57 percent of total global output. We will thus see the return of history, although it has taken more than two hundred years for Asia to economically come full circle.

52. Even when Asia is producing 60 percent of the wealth of the world, Asians will continue to be poor. But the economic centre of gravity will have shifted. With it must move the political centre of gravity. I hope that the civilisational centre of gravity will also have shifted.

53. Asia will need to face the challenge of leadership, a most difficult challenge when it is recognised that unlike Europe and even the Americas, our diversity is unmatched and our ability to act cohesively and in solidarity will be limited. We can contribute best by joining hands among ourselves and joining hands with Europe, with North America, with Africa, with every other part of the world.

54. I have come to Europe before to ask for the hand of cooperation and to urge that Asia and Europe work together. I am here in Europe once again to call for cooperation and for working together.

55. In the days ahead, we must expect Asia to seek greater Asian self determination. Asia cannot be denied the right to organise, the right to work together, the right to seek solidarity and to build unity. It cannot be expected to accept dictation without demur and "advice", the way advice was given in the old days, without a murmur.

56. Asia cannot be expected to continue to be the objects rather than the subjects of history, the victim or beneficiary of decisions made elsewhere. Asia cannot be expected to be a bystander, standing on the banks of the fast-flowing rivers of change. Asia must be expected to be in the thick of it.

57. Without the framework of civility and civilisation, can Asia be trusted to behave well and in the most civilised manner, without arrogance and with full wisdom? I believe not. No more than could Europe or the United states in days now past.

58. This is why it is essential to ensure a Global Commonwealth that is much more democratic, that is much more egalitarian, where leadership will come from every point of the compass. This is why it is important to ensure a global order better than anything we have seen in the past.

59. We are only 26 months away from the 21st century. There is little time to lose.

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