



---

Launching a Commonwealth of Nations Now

Author(s): Jessie M. Street

Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Jun., 1941), pp. 30-34

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20630932>

Accessed: 16/01/2014 20:08

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Australian Institute of Policy and Science is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Australian Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Launching a Commonwealth of Nations Now

By JESSIE M. STREET

Among the subjects which are exercising the minds of people all over the world to-day are the bringing of this war to a successful conclusion and the possibility of establishing the reign of international law and of justice, liberty and democracy.

Before we can make any headway in the solution of these problems, we must endeavour to understand what causes are responsible for war and injustice and lawlessness. The detailed causes are many, and they vary in different details in different countries, but the main causes can be said to be broadly the "clash of interests." It is reasonable to suppose that wherever a clash of interests can be lessened or eliminated a cause of war, injustice or lawlessness may be mitigated or removed.

The sphere in which the main clash of interests occurs between countries is that of trade. Now, although the actual incident which determines the rulers of a country to declare war may have nothing to do with trade, an examination of the events and circumstances leading up to that final incident will reveal a gradual building up of animosity and jealousy on trade rivalry. Countries endeavour to protect their trading rights and privileges by erecting tariff barriers and manipulating the exchange value of their currency. These measures are countered by rival nations taking similar action, and a tariff and currency war is under way. Feelings are embittered and national rivalries and jealousies invoked. Greater stress is laid on the need for national defence, and armaments and armies are increased and an aggressive defence policy adopted. For we must always remember that what appears as a legitimate defence measure in the home country, tends to present itself as a policy likely to have aggressive intentions to a neighbouring country. Nationalist feelings are further worked upon and sooner or later an "incident" takes place and war is the outcome. And it is a war that must be fought to the death, for each

country knows full well that the victorious country will increase its trading rights and privileges and thereby its wealth, at the expense of the loser, and the losing country will have to start again at its beginning, denuded of its markets, its supply of raw materials and practically everything it had succeeded in developing and winning for itself.

We must remember that internationally we are just beginning to realize the need for regulating and controlling the relationships of countries to each other. Tariffs, exchange control and defence policy are attempts to regulate the international relationship of the interests and peoples of different countries. It took some hundreds of years for us to realize the need for regulation and control in the national sphere. But for some centuries now we have been perfecting our national machinery. Parliaments, laws, courts, police, control of currency, trade, and a thousand other devices regulate the relationship of people and protect their rights, persons and property. These measures have curtailed the liberties of the individual where they infringe on the liberties of others, but by their impartial enforcement, clashes of interest within the nation are controlled, and justice and law and liberty maintained. We have only to picture to ourselves the chaotic state of any country which abandoned such regulation and control within its boundaries, to understand some of the causes of the inevitable clashes which lead to war in the international sphere.

Are we over-optimistic in supposing that if some form of international control was exercised for the purpose of regulating certain spheres of common and vital interest to all nations, an effective check could be placed on the "clash of interests" between nations. There seems just as good reason to suppose this happy result would eventuate in the international sphere as has occurred in the national sphere. We can say quite definitely that if the management of tariffs, currency and defence were surrendered to an over-riding body of control on which all the participating nations were represented, that the main causes of "friction between nations" of "clashes of interest" which ultimately and inevitably lead to war, would be avoided.

We have a number of contemporary precedents that show the above hypothesis to be probably correct. The oldest established example of the surrender of certain controls to an over-riding representative body is Switzerland. There are also the U.S.A., the Commonwealth of Australia, the Dominion of Canada, and the Union of South Africa. There is no question in any of these countries as to the wisdom of the surrender of control over these matters to an over-riding control; it is generally recognized to be to the benefit of each

of the component parts of the agglomeration of smaller States. Certain causes of friction are thereby avoided and the threat of aggression by one component part on another is minimized to the extent of extinction.

If we acknowledge that there are very great benefits that would derive from the formation of a Commonwealth of Nations within which certain controls would be exercised by the Commonwealth to regulate the relationship of the member nations, our next step is to examine how we should set about forming such a Commonwealth. A prerequisite for its formation would probably be provided by a common objective or a common danger presenting itself to a number of nations. Another circumstance that would greatly assist such a formation would be the robbing of nations of their rights and sovereignty by another nation. This would assist in overcoming any suggestion that nations were being called on to make sacrifices inconsistent with their national honour, or incommensurate with those of other nations joining the Commonwealth.

At the present time all these factors are in existence to a degree undreamed of a couple of years ago. The war has supplied the common objective and the common danger. This is a war for the protection of the rights and privileges of democracy and liberty. All who believe in these ideals are united against the menace of Nazism and Fascism. We can also say that owing to the war many nations have been robbed of their rights and sovereignty. At the present time no less than five European Governments have taken up their headquarters in England. These Governments, together with the British Government, present the ingredients which could be formed into the beginnings of a Commonwealth of Nations. The Governments I refer to are those of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Holland and Belgium. Each of these possesses armed forces and equipment; some own colonies and carry on trade in those parts of their empires which have not been invaded. For the time being they have voluntarily surrendered independent policies regarding defence, finance and trade, and are co-operating fully with the policy of the British Government. If this voluntary and temporary co-operation could be developed into a legal and permanent unity, the Commonwealth of Nations on the lines we have been discussing would become an accomplished fact.

Some provision would have to be made for the setting up of a Commonwealth Council to govern in the spheres surrendered to the Commonwealth. Also a code of Commonwealth Law would have to be adopted by the nations concerned, which they would have to agree to obey, and a Commonwealth Court set up to administer this law.

The nations would further have to agree that all disputes between the nations of the Commonwealth would have to be submitted to and settled by the Commonwealth Court.

The economic and financial advantages of membership of the Commonwealth of Nations would be considerable. With the Commonwealth governing body controlling defence, currency and tariffs, it would be a comparatively easy task for the Court to enforce its authority over any constituent nation which was showing signs of becoming recalcitrant or which flouted the authority of the Commonwealth governing body or the Court.

The formation of a Commonwealth of Nations would fit in with the expressed wish for international co-operation which is found in practically every suggestion that has been made for a reconstructed world order by any organization or responsible person in England. And note this well—the suggestion of international control over currency and trading rights has all along been among the stressed objectives of the Axis powers. Great emphasis has always been laid by Hitler, Mussolini and Japanese politicians on the advantages the British Empire enjoys by reason of its trade advantages and its control of the money market. The main cause of the discontent of the Axis powers is claimed to be the restrictions placed on their opportunities for trade by means of currency and trade restrictions. They capitalize these grievances, and the main basis of the promises the Axis powers make to countries they try to win over to their side are that, with the overthrow of the British Empire, its control over the trade and finance of the world will be broken.

If a Commonwealth of Nations were formed on the lines suggested above, to a great extent the ground of the appeal of the Axis powers would be cut from under their feet. More especially would this be so were membership, with full rights and privileges, of the Commonwealth, open to all nations complying with the conditions accepted by the foundation members. Membership should be open to enemy nations on the same conditions. This may seem quixotic, but an indispensable condition of the formation of such a Commonwealth of Nations must be that all nations are eligible to enter on the same terms as the foundation nations. Otherwise it cannot but develop into a powerful bloc of nations with interests of its own to foster, and against which another bloc must be organized in order to live. Again we will have the time honoured sequence of the clash of interests leading up to war.

The idea that nations can only live in competition with each other has been proved a fallacy. Competition sooner or later leads to war.

Co-operation, not competition, is the watchword to-day. We can say without fear of contradiction that the measure of justice, liberty, democracy and peace we have already obtained is in proportion to the extent that we have developed our desire and means for co-operation.

Let us suppose a Commonwealth were formed consisting of those nations, the headquarters of whose Governments are now in London, which had voluntarily surrendered certain spheres of control, and provision made for any other nation to join on the same terms as the foundation members. If this were actually accomplished and no obstacle placed in the way of Germany, Italy and Japan joining on the same conditions, it might conceivably open the way for negotiation to this end, which would inevitably lead to negotiation on the subject of peace. Do not let anyone confuse negotiation with appeasement. Negotiation can end in appeasement, which the last twenty years has shown us has led in every case to war, but negotiation can also end in an honourable peace. We can go further and say that an honourable peace can only be brought about by negotiation. Provided we can trust the motives and integrity of those negotiating peace, we need have no fear of negotiation.

England has prided herself, rightly or wrongly, on leading the world in the love of freedom and justice and peace. Let England grasp the opportunity which presents itself to her of launching a Commonwealth of Nations organized on the basis of justice, equality and democracy. To do so, some of her rich and powerful men and monopolies will have to surrender the opportunities they now have of advantageous trading rights over the smaller countries. But is the preservation of these rights worth the recurrence of periodic wars—that is the question we as a nation must face. As the marauding barons and pirates of old had to surrender their opportunities of accumulating riches, and young bloods and old bullies surrender their swords and pistols so that a law-respecting society within the nation might be established, so must the nations to-day surrender opportunities and sacrifice individual liberties that international justice and a law-respecting international order may be established.

The formation of a Commonwealth of Nations, as suggested, would give tremendous heart to the peoples of the invaded countries, and it would stimulate their resistance and make the task of the invader more difficult. It would be a real achievement towards the new order of which we hear so much talk, but of which to date we have so little evidence.