SOUTH AFRICA'S WITHDRAWAL.

Three or four weeks ago I gave my own views on South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Since then, the Opposition has attacked the Prime Minister for the stand which he has taken. The Opposition principally attacked our Prime Minister for refusing to condemn apartheid in terms that would reflect the views of the Australian people.

The Prime Minister had maintained a strict silence on South Africa, believing that if all Prime Ministers in the Commonwealth refrained from committing themselves in public on this issue they would have a much greater chance of exerting an influence on South Africa at the Prime Ministers' Conference.

This hope of our Prime Minister's was not to be, because he was the only one who was uncommitted on this issue before the Conference began. As a consequence of this, I believe the several Prime Ministers' influence on South Africa was as nothing. If they had not been previously committed to condemnation of apartheid, they might have won some modification of South Africa's views. However, now that everything is done and South Africa has withdrawn, our Prime Minister felt freed from his own inhibitions in regard to this matter and attacked apartheid and condemned it in terms which reflected the opinion of every Australian.

The Prime Minister was also attacked for having differed from the United Kingdom Prime Minister, Mr. McMillan. I pointed out in the debate that, in the four essentials, the two Prime Ministers were as one. They both originally wanted South Africa to stay in the Commonwealth. They both worked to see that she should. They both wanted the best thing for the subjugated people of South Africa. They both deplored and abhorred the policy of apartheid that was being put into effect. These were the important issues. On these matters, they agreed.

The most important reason for trying to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth was the belief and the hope that membership of the Commonwealth could exert a moderating influence on South Africa's policies and would offer the best chance of ultimate freedom and equality for the 9 million Bantu in that country.

Against this argument for keeping South Africa in the Commonwealth there are two powerful arguments for pushing her out. The first of these is that South Africa's withdrawal makes the Commonwealth a stronger moral force, and secondly, that it will increase the strength and unity of the Commonwealth. Essentially, I believe this will happen.

We should try to understand the issues that are involved - the nature of apartheid and its effect on the future of the Commonwealth. The conditions of the age make the issue a unique one. The spirit and emotion of our times are represented in the emancipation and self-government of coloured people and anything that flies in the face of this cannot stand. This was recognised by the Australian vote in the United Nations condemning apartheid. Although apartheid is internal in its administration, it is clearly international in effect. The reasons for this are plain.

The Bantu in South Africa are second-class citizens while in other Commonwealth countries like Nigeria they have blood brothers who are our equal in station and respect. This is intolerable for African or Asian members of the Commonwealth. The
emotion engendered by this is something that cannot be disregarded. South Africa has made this feeling worse by refusing to accept diplomatic representatives from Asian or African members of the Commonwealth.

The crucial point is this. The South African Government is trying to make a right out of a wrong. Apartheid is its declared course of action for the future. In this, South Africa is trying to march against the course of history. While we ourselves are not free of all the prejudices and sins of the past, we are trying to rid ourselves of them as are other Commonwealth countries but South Africa was not and is not.

All this makes apartheid a unique issue. In Australia we have felt this issue very deeply because South Africa was a foundation member of the Commonwealth, ostensibly a member of the free world and a member of the British family with some share in the British heritage. We have felt the crime that she is committing much worse than some things done in other countries in which more people have been hurt, killed or wounded, because we believe that South Africa has let the Commonwealth down and has let the free world down. We expect the free nations, the British nations in particular, to set an example. South Africa has done the opposite.

I believe it inevitable that South Africa, determined on its present course, had to withdraw from the Commonwealth, especially when you have regard to the nature of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was once a small group of 5 nations with close ties of allegiance, race, colour and heritage. But now, Commonwealth countries are not all bound by loyalty to the Throne. They are not bound by colour or by heritage. They are not all tied to any power group. They have no mutual defensive arrangements.

There is only one possible common denominator for Commonwealth countries at the present time. It is a state of common ideals based on racial equality. If the Commonwealth cannot work and maintain that principle then the Commonwealth cannot work at all. This still does not mean that we are all perfect in pursuit of these ideals but it means that we are all trying to pursue them as well as we can.

I regard the Commonwealth as a bridge between people of different races and colours and it is important that this bridge stands. South Africa's withdrawal has made it possible for the bridge to stand. If she had remained in the Commonwealth it would have fallen.

If recent events have aroused some uneasiness in us for the future, we should all realise that we must make the Commonwealth work. If it cannot work, then the world cannot work, and there is not much hope for us.