

OBSERVER AT LARGE

(COMMITTED to spending "not less than one year" touring the British Commonwealth, Michael Stephens, a BBC Talks Producer, was bearing the sentence with remarkable cheerfulness when he called to see *The Listener* towards the end of the New Zealand leg of the journey. All the same, this year of travel was turning out the most exhausting and exacting, mentally and physically, he had ever known, he told us. "In 55 or 56 weeks I shall have visited almost as many different places. Sometimes I spend a fortnight in one place, sometimes as little as two days."

Mr. Stephens joined the BBC just six years ago after reading history at



N.P.S. photograph

MICHAEL STEPHENS

Cambridge and, before that, spending four years as an R.A.F. navigator. His specific job is with the Third Programme, where he looks after history, political science and Commonwealth affairs in particular, but has also been concerned with such subjects as anthropology and archaeology. His present trip arises from a suggestion he made just before the Coronation that a series of programmes on Commonwealth points of view could be done properly only by making a trip around the Commonwealth. The project was shelved then, and the aim of the trip Mr. Stephens is making now is not to find an individual in each country to contribute a talk to a series, but "to get my own impressions of what the Commonwealth looks like from within each of the member countries, and to make contact with a wide number of people interested in Commonwealth affairs." Back home, Mr. Stephens will write a report, and he hopes that out of it will come new schemes for programmes on Commonwealth affairs. The Imperial Relations Trust, which is also interested in the survey, financed the trip, and it was they who insisted that it should take not less than a year.

Giving us one or two key impressions from his tour so far, Mr. Stephens said he thought it was broadly true that in each Commonwealth country people thought primarily in terms of the relations between their country and Britain, and judged other Commonwealth members in the light of that. Thus, because New Zealanders were particularly loyal they seemed a little distrustful of countries like India, Pakistan and Ceylon,

which had gone republican. "In fact," said Mr. Stephens, "it seems to me that the relationship between each of the Commonwealth countries and Britain is unique, and it's rather retrograde to try to base a concept of the Commonwealth on one kind of bilateral relationship. That tends to focus on things that are different in the relationship rather than on things that are common. My great concern at the moment is to try to sort out from my impressions the things that are common to us and that are growing points for closer association. I've been struck to find how the same sort of institutions and ways of doing things—parliamentary, legal and so on—that first developed in the older members have been created in the Asian parts of the Commonwealth. And it seems to me that that pattern—a system of administration and political organisation based on common ideas—is perhaps going to be the greatest achievement of the Commonwealth, and the strongest bond between its members." Recalling Western press criticism of the recent elections in Ceylon as a "major setback for the West," and the puzzlement of the people there that they should be criticised for really making the democratic system work, Mr. Stephens said: "I think it's far healthier that they should take pride in elections than that we should keep them in power because they're like us."

When we asked Mr. Stephens about the work of the BBC's Third Programme, he said that the main concern of its talks policy was "to keep in touch with the new and creative experiences of the community"—to find the people who had just done some new and exciting thing, and to use the microphone to give them the opportunity of communicating these new experiences to the community. So the staff was concerned not only with unsolicited offers to broadcast—it also tried to keep in touch with people in various walks of life, "to know the people involved and what they're up to, so as to be able to catch them at the moment when they really have something to say." That, he added, applied to the Home Service and the Light Programme as well.

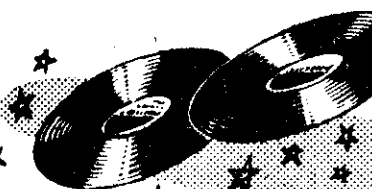
Mr. Stephens said it had been found that the audience for the Third Programme talks was selective, "which is what we expect—and hope." "It isn't a question of trying to please all the people all the time or all the people some of the time, but some of the people some of the time and different people at different times." And so, though the average audience is around 40,000 to 60,000, in a period of a week something like 1,500,000 listen to at least one item on the Third Programme, in a month it's just over 2,000,000, and in three months something like 4,000,000.

With the development of television and the movement away from sound radio, said Mr. Stephens, the Third Programme found in one sense a new justification, "because it is the one of all our programmes which is first and foremost a sound radio programme—a great deal of it couldn't be translated into visual terms." And although television was now making a better job of some of sound radio's stock-in-trade programmes, it was also releasing new energies within the production departments to concentrate again on new ways of developing sound radio programmes.

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