

# The Commonwealth: A Brief History

A Primer for Delegates of the 33<sup>rd</sup> National Student Commonwealth Forum, 1 to 6 May, 2005

**The Commonwealth is a unique family of 53 member countries around the world sharing many common interests. As a multiracial association of states, all equal and sovereign, it is a world away from the handful of British Dominions which were the first Commonwealth members. From Africa to India, from Pacific shores to the Caribbean, the Commonwealth's 1.7 billion people make up almost a third of the world's population.**

The modern Commonwealth evolved out of Britain's imperial past over a period of many years, largely as a result of decolonization, the effects of two world wars and changing patterns of international relations. Today it helps to advance democracy, human rights, sustainable economic and social development and many other endeavours. With a common working language and similar systems of law, public administration and education, the Commonwealth has built on its shared history to become a vibrant and growing association of states in tune with the modern world.

## From Empire to Commonwealth

The modern Commonwealth has its roots in the 19th century. In 1867, Canada became the first colony to be transformed into a self-governing 'Dominion'; a status which came to imply equality with Britain. In Australia in 1884, Lord Rosebery, a British politician, was the first to call this changing empire a 'Commonwealth of Nations'.

In 1931, British parliament adopted the Statute of Westminster, forming the legal foundation for what was to become the Commonwealth. Under the Statute, the Dominions of Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Irish Free State became "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations."

## The Unofficial Commonwealth Emerges

Meanwhile, many groups linking professions and institutions among the Dominions began to flourish, laying the foundation stones for today's 'unofficial Commonwealth' of professional associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In 1911, the forerunner of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was established, followed in 1913 by the Universities Bureau of the British Empire (now the Association of Commonwealth Universities). In 1930, the first Empire (later Commonwealth) Games were held.

## The New Commonwealth

In 1949, India's desire to become a republic, yet remain in the Commonwealth, forced leaders to rethink the principles of Commonwealth membership. At a conference of Commonwealth prime ministers that same year, the decision

was made to welcome India as the Commonwealth's first republican member. This decision was affirmed in the London Declaration of 1949, which recognized King George VI as the "symbol of their free association and thus Head of the Commonwealth". To reflect the Commonwealth's new reality, the word "British" was also dropped from the association's title.

Committed to racial equality and national sovereignty, the Commonwealth became a natural association of choice for many new nations emerging out of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Ghana achieved independence in 1957 and became the first majority-ruled African member. From 1960 onwards, the Commonwealth expanded rapidly with new members from Africa, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and the Pacific.

Today, 32 members are republics and five have national monarchies of their own (Brunei Darussalam, Lesotho, Malaysia, Swaziland and Tonga). Sixteen are constitutional monarchies which recognize Queen Elizabeth II as their Head of State. All, however, accept the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth.

## Winds of Change

The Commonwealth's principled opposition to all forms of racism, and especially apartheid, led to the withdrawal of South Africa in 1961. (In 1994, following the end of apartheid and the establishment of a non-racial government, South Africa rejoined the association.) In the mid-1960s the Commonwealth also kept up pressure on the rebel white minority government in Rhodesia and helped train some 4,500 Zimbabweans in the professional skills they would need on the day of majority rule.

In 1965, another milestone was reached when Commonwealth leaders established the Commonwealth Secretariat in London to be the association's own independent civil service, headed by a Commonwealth Secretary-General. A year on, the Commonwealth Foundation was launched to assist the work of the many Commonwealth professional associations and later NGOs. The first Commonwealth Secretary-General was Arnold Smith, a former Canadian diplomat. He served for ten years and was succeeded by Sir Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal, of Guyana. In 1990, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, a senior Nigerian diplomat, became the third office holder.

The current Secretary-General, the Rt. Hon Donald C McKinnon, was elected in November 1999 at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Durban, South Africa. He assumed office on 1 April 2000. A New Zealand citizen, Mr McKinnon was New Zealand's longest serving Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Two further milestones occurred in 1971. First, leaders adopted the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles which

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gave the association a formal code of ethics, and committed members to improving human rights and seeking racial and economic justice. Second, they established the

Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC). Based on the concept of mutualism, the CFTC was among the first to advance the idea of technical co-operation among developing countries.

### Towards a New Century

For the Commonwealth, apart from the successful birth of Zimbabwe and the continuing struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the 1980s was the decade of Expert Group reports. Commissioned by the Secretary-General, these reports focused world attention on important issues of the day including the North-South dialogue (1982) and the vulnerabilities of small states (1985).

Successive Commonwealth summits also focused world attention on topical and sometimes controversial issues.

In 1991, the Harare Commonwealth Declaration set the association firmly on a new course for a new century: that of promoting democracy and good government, human rights and the rule of law, and sustainable economic and social development. As part of the Harare priorities, the Commonwealth provides assistance to countries in transition to democracy by helping to draft legislation, review and amend electoral procedures and otherwise create the framework for democracy to take root. Between 1990 and mid-1996, the Commonwealth observed some 18 elections or referendums to further this work.

At their 1995 summit in New Zealand, leaders adopted the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme to give practical expression to the Harare principles, particularly democracy, development and consensus-building. They agreed on practical steps to address serious and persistent

### Members & Regions of the Commonwealth

#### *The Caribbean & North, Central & South America*

Antigua & Barbuda, Guyana, The Bahamas, Jamaica, Barbados, St. Kitts & Nevis, Grenada, Belize, St. Lucia+, Canada+, St. Vincent & The Grenadines, Dominica+, Trinidad & Tobago.

#### *Europe & the Mediterranean*

United Kingdom, Cyprus, Malta

#### *Africa*

Botswana, Nigeria, Cameroon+, Seychelles+, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho, Tanzania, Malawi, Uganda, Mauritius+, Zambia, Mozambique.

Zimbabwe \*(now withdrawn from membership)

#### *Pacific*

Australia, Samoa, Fiji Islands, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, Nauru, Tuvalu, New Zealand, Vanuatu+, Papua New Guinea

#### *Asia*

India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Pakistan (*at present excluded from the "Councils of the Commonwealth"*).

\* Zimbabwe withdrew from Commonwealth membership in December 2003.

+ indicates country is also a member country of *la Francophonie*.

violations of these principles and established a mechanism - a Ministerial Action Group of Foreign Ministers - to carry this forward. In that context, they took the unprecedented step of suspending Nigeria's membership.

### The Commonwealth Today

Today, the Commonwealth continues to be an active force in global affairs, helping to build consensus around the world. It manages a Joint Commonwealth Office in New York City in order that small member countries can afford to have permanent missions to the United Nations. Under Commonwealth auspices, the Iwokrama International Rainforest Programme in Guyana was launched to develop sustainable use of the world's vanishing rainforests. In 1996, the Commonwealth Africa Investment Fund was created to channel investment to 19 member countries in Africa. It is the first in a series of regional funds to be launched under the Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative.

### The CHOGM

Today, Heads of Government (usually Presidents and Prime Ministers) and Government Ministers of member countries meet regularly to discuss how better to cooperate with each other. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) takes place about every two years. The last two CHOGMs took place in Coolom, Australia in March 2002 and in Abuja, Nigeria in December 2003. The next will be in Valletta, Malta, in 2005. The policies and activities that are decided upon at CHOGM are carried out through the Commonwealth Secretariat at Marlborough House in London.

-- Editor: D. Lynch

### Sources/Links for Further Information on the Commonwealth:

<http://www.rcscanada.org/commonwealth/history.html>

<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/>

[http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/foreign\\_policy/commonwealth/menu-en.asp](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/foreign_policy/commonwealth/menu-en.asp)