



**The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia**

**Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade**

# **FROM EMPIRE TO PARTNERSHIP:**

**Report on a Seminar on the  
Commonwealth of Nations**

**20 August 1997, Canberra**

**October 1997**

## INTRODUCTION

---

The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade from time to time holds public seminars on foreign policy or defence issues that it believes are of interest. In May 1997 the Committee agreed to conduct one of these seminars on the issue of the Commonwealth of Nations. The theme of the seminar was 'The Commonwealth of Nations in the 21st Century'.

The Committee was interested in examining whether the Commonwealth remains relevant in the post Cold War period, and indeed whether it is of even more relevance given the momentous changes in the international arena that have occurred over the last decade. Is the notion of a 'Commonwealth of Nations' out of date, or is it rather that generally held perceptions of the Commonwealth are themselves outmoded and no longer applicable? Related to this is whether the Commonwealth is of value as a network, and how can Australia best participate in such a network in future.

The Commonwealth has changed in many ways since the days when it was 'The British Commonwealth' and the expanding membership of the Commonwealth raises a number of issues about the nature of the ties of the organisation and its future direction.

The next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which will be held in Edinburgh this month, will see Fiji reapplying for membership, and a decision made on the future of Nigeria, currently suspended from the Commonwealth. The question of criteria for membership will also be addressed. This will be the first CHOGM attended by the new government in Britain and there will be considerable interest in their approach to the association compared to their predecessors. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report on the Commonwealth, mentioned in Section 1 of this report, seemed to the Joint Standing Committee to be far more oriented to what the Commonwealth could mean for Britain, and generated some concern about the value of the Commonwealth for other participants. The Joint Standing Committee, therefore, was particularly concerned to address these issues in the seminar context.

The Committee invited as wide a cross section of people to the seminar as possible - parliamentarians, academics, members of the diplomatic corps, business representatives, members of various Commonwealth organisations, and members of the general public. The seminar was also advertised in the press. Discussion was wide-ranging and the Committee would like to thank all who participated, and in particular those who gave short presentations at the start of each session.

The seminar provided a most valuable opportunity for everyone to update their knowledge about what the Commonwealth actually is, and to explore the challenges facing it. Having spent a day in discussion, all who participated were greatly impressed by the range and depth of Commonwealth contacts and the extent to which it provides an ongoing and unique network among member countries.

Given that the seminar was held to provide an opportunity for debate and public discussion, the Committee has sought to confine its recommendations to a minimum; this was not a full

inquiry and the Committee would not presume to say that it had thoroughly examined all aspects of the Commonwealth. However, there are a number of issues that the Committee believes should be given further consideration by government, and these are highlighted. The views of participants are quoted in this report, but should not be taken to represent the views of the Committee unless specifically noted.

This report provides a brief summary of the seminar and contains, at Appendix 5, a full transcript of the day's proceedings.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

---

### SECTION 1

The Committee is not convinced that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is devoting sufficient attention and emphasis to the Commonwealth, particularly given the potential of the Commonwealth in trade matters.

The Committee felt that the issue of how the Commonwealth is perceived, not only in the general community, but within government and the media, was critical to the level of support the organisation receives, and the value placed on its work.

While some reservations were expressed that regardless of action to redress incorrect perceptions, the image of the Commonwealth in Australia was unlikely to improve, the Committee believes that two specific suggestions have considerable merit.

**Recommendation 1: That the Australian Government, in consultation with Commonwealth organisations and educational institutions, assist in the establishment of a Commonwealth resources centre.**

**Recommendation 2: That the Australian Government consult with the Commonwealth Secretariat, in the first instance, on the identity and possible tasks for a group of eminent persons who can publicise the work of the Commonwealth.**

The Committee believes the establishment of an Association for Commonwealth Studies would be a very useful step and urges the Australian Government to participate in the establishment of the Association in whatever capacity it is able, and to examine the other recommendations of the Symons report for relevance to Australia.

### SECTION 2

**Recommendation 3: That the Prime Minister report on the outcome of the CHOGM meeting, with a view to highlighting the benefits for Australia from such meetings.**

Given the growing strength of ASEAN, the significant economic links that exist in the Asia Pacific region, and Australia's growing relationship with those countries in our immediate region, the Committee believes there would be value in a regional forum being established under the auspices of the Commonwealth, to involve Commonwealth countries in South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific.

**Recommendation 4: That the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Prime Minister and Cabinet examine the question of reinstating a Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting, and determine if there is regional support for its reintroduction.**

The Committee is concerned that there is a perception that Australian ministers are not participating at Commonwealth meetings. Without taking detailed evidence on the level of participation, the Committee is not prepared to make a specific recommendation on this matter. However, the Committee would encourage the Australian Government to maintain its representation at such meetings at ministerial level.

The Committee believes that the linkages that are developed by foreign students studying in Australia are invaluable. Given the implications of rising costs in obtaining a tertiary education, and the value of previous schemes such as the Colombo Plan, the Committee believes that some specific assistance should be given to students from Commonwealth countries seeking to obtain tertiary and post-graduate qualifications.

**Recommendation 5: That the Australian Government, as part of its aid program, set aside a defined number of scholarships for students from Commonwealth countries to assist with tertiary and post-graduate education in Australia.**

The Committee commends the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association for the assistance it provides to its smaller member parliaments, and for the role it plays in providing a forum for parliamentarians from a wide range of backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas.

**Recommendation 6: That the Australian branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association encourage it to continue as a forum promoting democratic values, the rule of law and freedom of the press.**

**Recommendation 7: That the Australian Government continue to support the Commonwealth Games Association, as a means of fostering closer contact throughout the Commonwealth, and encouraging all member states to meet in friendly competition.**

The Committee believes that a spirit of partnership is essential if Commonwealth non-government organisations are to continue to develop and meet the changing needs of all participants. The Committee also notes the valuable role such NGOs can play in assisting governments in developing countries to assist their populations to a better standard of living.

**Recommendation 8: That the Australian Government continue its support of Commonwealth NGOs in their work in the less developed Commonwealth member countries.**

### SECTION 3

Meetings of Commonwealth Trade Ministers have ceased and it was suggested that it might be worthwhile to look at either reviving those meetings or combining them with the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meetings. While the Committee is not convinced about combining meetings of Commonwealth Trade and Finance Ministers, the Committee does believe that there may be a useful role to be played regionally by meetings of Commonwealth Trade Ministers. Such meetings would complement the work being done in APEC, AFTA and through CER and would provide a truly regional focus.

**Recommendation 9: That the Australian Minister for Trade together with his regional Commonwealth counterparts consider establishing regular meetings of regional Commonwealth Trade Ministers.**

While the Committee acknowledges that the Commonwealth is not a trading bloc as such, and the days of Commonwealth preferences are long gone, there may be potential for Commonwealth countries to assist each other in improving access to markets.

### SECTION 4

**Recommendation 10: That the Australian Government raise with other Commonwealth members the strengthening of the role and resources of the Human Rights Unit within the Secretariat, to enable it to take a wider approach to the promotion and protection of human rights.**

The Commonwealth has moved increasingly to a more active role in human rights issues. The challenge facing the Commonwealth is whether it should attempt to set and enforce basic standards of behaviour for its member states, or attempt to ameliorate unacceptable behaviour by members through behind-the-scenes diplomacy. If the Commonwealth is to be an effective organisation, and promote ideals of good governance and cooperation, it may well find it will need to replace rhetoric with more concrete action. At issue will be whether such action will alter the basic nature of the Commonwealth and the way in which its individual members relate to each other.

The Commonwealth is an important vehicle for political, economic, social, cultural and sporting contact and considerable benefits accrue to Australia from its membership. The Committee encourages the Australian government to maximise the advantages that arise from our membership for the benefit of Australia as a whole.

## SECTION 1

### THE COMMONWEALTH: AN OVERVIEW

---

1.1 The Commonwealth is 'a voluntary association of independent sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interests of their peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace'.<sup>1</sup> Growing out of the former British Empire, it has as its members many former dominions and colonies of Britain.

1.2 The Commonwealth currently has 53 member nations<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix 2), with a total population of one and a half billion people. It comprises one-third of the world's states and one-quarter of its people. Thirty-two member countries are republics. Sixteen are constitutional monarchies which recognise the Queen as their Head of State. Five countries have national monarchs (Brunei, Lesotho, Malaysia, Swaziland and Tonga). While Commonwealth membership is confined to sovereign countries, self-governing states and dependencies of member countries are eligible to take part in many Commonwealth activities and to receive technical assistance. A list is also included at Appendix 2.

1.3 The geographic reach of the Commonwealth, however, while being transregional is not fully global: apart from Guyana, there are no South American members; no members from continental Europe; no members from the Middle East; no members in eastern Europe through to the Far East; and no members drawn from Indo-China north of Malaysia.

1.4 Some have suggested that it is easier to define the Commonwealth by what it isn't than by what it is.<sup>3</sup> As one commentator has observed:

The Commonwealth has always defied precise definition, partly because it has been continuously evolving to meet changing needs and circumstances and partly because it has many facets, official and unofficial, and means different things to different people.<sup>4</sup>

1.5 The Commonwealth has no constitution or charter, but members commit themselves to the core statements of belief issued at biennial summit meetings of Commonwealth Heads of Government. The more significant of these include:

- Declaration of Commonwealth Principles (Singapore, 1971)
- the Harare Commonwealth Declaration (1991)

---

1 *Declaration of Commonwealth Principles*, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Singapore, 1971.

2 Fiji withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1985. Nigeria's membership was suspended in 1995 and this will be reviewed at the 1997 CHOGM meeting.

3 see for example, Walker, A., *The Commonwealth: A New Look*, Pergamon Press, 1978. p. 2

4 Doxey, M., 'Meeting New Challenges: Commonwealth roles and structures in the 1990s' in *The Round Table*, October 1993, p. 430.

- the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme, issued by the Commonwealth leaders at their summit in New Zealand in November 1995.

1.6 The first of these, the Singapore Declaration, signalled that 'the Commonwealth would commit itself to international endeavours to make a fairer world, and would in particular fight the attitudes and structures which disadvantaged the Third World and its peoples.'<sup>5</sup>

1.7 The Harare Commonwealth Declaration committed 'the association and its members to the pursuit of fundamental political rights and good governance – democracy within a framework of full human rights.'<sup>6</sup> It expanded on the Singapore Declaration, 'spelling out the policy implications of these principles and including specific commitments on women and the environment. It greatly enhances the Commonwealth's role in all areas of individual liberty and good governance, notably in helping countries to build stronger democracies. It also acknowledges the changed economic and financial climate, with special support for sustainable development, sound economic management within a market economy, and technological advance.'<sup>7</sup>

1.8 The Millbrook programme is in three parts: measures to strengthen the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth; boosting of sustainable development; and enhancing of the Commonwealth's capacity to build bridges across international divisions.<sup>8</sup>

1.9 The Commonwealth has two unique attributes: first, it is far more than an association of governments; it is a giant network of contacts at both the official and unofficial level. This distinguishing characteristic is discussed in more depth in Section 2 of this report. The other unique feature is its 'relaxed and cooperative esprit de corps' which arises because it is seen as non-threatening, participants share a common language and a common heritage with shared institutions and there are no superpowers in the Commonwealth, and no one country is able to dominate.<sup>9</sup>

1.10 Because the Commonwealth lacks a constitution and because of the informal and diverse nature of its network, it is often hard to evaluate the role it has played in international politics, and indeed any future role it might play. Malcolm Fraser, at the seminar, spoke of '... an enormously pragmatic organisation ... [able to adjust] ... to whatever the circumstances happen to be at the time ...'.<sup>10</sup> He also noted that on many occasions members have shown that they want action, not just consultation; that consultation alone is not a reason for the Commonwealth to exist.<sup>11</sup>

---

5 Gunthorp, D., *The Commonwealth Yearbook 1996*, p. 93.

6 *ibid.*, p. 21.

7 *ibid.*, p. 95.

8 *ibid.*, p. 19.

9 Saravanamuttoo, N., 'Are we building a Commonwealth for Tomorrow?' in *The Round Table*, October 1995, p. 438.

10 Fraser, Transcript, p. 5.

11 *ibid.*, p. 6.



1.11 The importance of the links and the shared background was highlighted by Mr Alf Parsons during the seminar, when he noted that:

... [at international meetings etc] there is an immediate bond with Commonwealth colleagues. You may in fact disagree with their side of an argument or where you are, but it is very easy to consult with them, to do deals or cut a few corners which immediately contributes to making solutions and generally getting the understanding that has to come from international organisations.<sup>12</sup>

## Membership

1.12 As noted above, there are currently 53 members of the Commonwealth.<sup>13</sup> Membership is entirely voluntary, and a number of former British dependencies, mandates, and protectorates, such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Burma, the Sudan, and several Gulf states, decided against membership when achieving independence. Some countries have also joined, left and in some cases, later rejoined the Commonwealth. Ireland withdrew its membership in 1949 and South Africa did not reapply for admission after becoming a republic in 1961, finally being readmitted on 1 June 1994. Pakistan left in 1972 and rejoined on 1 October 1989; Fiji's membership lapsed when it did not reapply after adopting a republican constitution after the military coup in 1987. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in November 1995, Nigeria's membership was suspended due to concerns about persistent human rights violations.

1.13 The Commonwealth has no charter or guidelines which set out the criteria for membership. All members, with one exception, have had a past association with another Commonwealth country, as colonies, protectorates or trust territories. Generally an application for membership must have broad-based support in the country concerned and be made to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who consults with all Heads of Government, and a decision on whether to admit a country to the Commonwealth is reached on the basis of consensus by Heads of Government. At the 1995 summit meeting, it was agreed that an Intergovernmental Group on Criteria for Commonwealth Membership be set up to advise Heads of Government on criteria for assessing future applications. The Group will report to the 1997 CHOGM.<sup>14</sup> There has been some speculation that it will attempt to impose stricter benchmarks, to insist on minimum standards of 'good governance' before membership is possible. The criteria may also include a requirement that the applicant have colonial or administrative links to Britain.<sup>15</sup>

---

12 Parsons, Transcript, p. 53.

13 Of these, two are Special Members, Nauru and Tuvalu. This category was created in 1968 by Heads of Government when Nauru, on becoming independent, asked that it be allowed a special relationship with the Commonwealth, taking into account its size and limited involvement in international affairs. Special members are not assessed for subscription to the Commonwealth Secretariat but contribute voluntarily to the Secretariat and other budgets; they do not send representatives to the meetings of Heads of Government but are eligible for all forms of assistance and information. From *The Commonwealth Secretariat web site* (<http://www.thecommonwealth.org>)

14 *The Commonwealth Secretariat web site*.

15 Smellie, P., 'Rwanda test for CHOGM new rules', in *The Weekend Australian*, 5 April 1997, p. 10.

1.14 The most recent member of the Commonwealth is Mozambique, a country with no historic links with the British Empire. It was admitted to the Commonwealth in 1995 as a 'unique and special case'. It is the first Commonwealth member which was neither formerly and formally under British rule (or that of another Commonwealth country) nor uses the English language substantially for top-level political and administrative purposes. As the Secretary General has noted, however:

... the Commonwealth has long embraced Mozambique as a 'cousin'. In recognition of the importance of that country's position and role in a region destabilised by the then apartheid government of South Africa and fragmented by war, the Special Fund for Mozambique was established in 1988 and operated until the end of its mandate in 1994. Since then its work has continued through the Commonwealth Capacity-Building Facility for Mozambique.<sup>16</sup>

1.15 A number of countries have indicated they wish to apply for membership of the Commonwealth, including Rwanda, South Yemen and Somalia. At the seminar, some concern was expressed that the common threads that bind Commonwealth countries, particularly English as the common language, could be damaged by too great an expansion of membership from countries that were not former British colonies. As Malcolm Fraser noted:

When Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings are held, there are no translators. The character of the Commonwealth would be changed quite significantly if you got to the stage where you had to have half-a-dozen translators for people speaking many different languages.<sup>17</sup>

## Financing the Commonwealth

1.16 The Secretariat and its work are financed by four separate budgets or funds, two of which are voluntary. The only assessed budgets are those of the Secretariat itself and the Commonwealth Science Council – governments make contributions on an agreed scale based on income and population size. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation and the Commonwealth Youth Program are financed by voluntary contributions.<sup>18</sup>

1.17 Australia is the third largest financial contributor (9.69%) to the Commonwealth, after the UK (30%) and Canada (19.07%). In 1996-97 Australia contributed \$2 million to the Commonwealth Secretariat and a further \$450,000 to the Commonwealth Foundation. In the same period, Australia will contribute \$8.2 million to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation.

1.18 Australia also contributes about \$300,000 a year towards the cost of the Commonwealth Small States Office in New York.

---

16 Anyaoku, Chief Emeka, 'The Commonwealth - ready to meet the challenges of the future' in *The Commonwealth Ministers Reference Book 1996/97*, p. 16.

17 Fraser, Transcript, pp. 7-8.

18 Gunthorp, D., op cit., p. 113.

## Role of the Queen

1.19 Queen Elizabeth II is accepted by all members of the Commonwealth as the Head of the Commonwealth. Her Majesty is not head of the Commonwealth as constitutional Queen of the British realm; it is the Queen not the Crown who is the Head. This is reflected in the fact that the Queen flies her personal standard for Commonwealth occasions.<sup>19</sup>

1.20 The confusion of monarchy and Commonwealth was commented on during the seminar:

... some people have a fuzzy and inaccurate sense of the role of the monarch within [the Commonwealth] ... and even wrongly equate being a Commonwealth country with being a monarchy ... I would have thought that the Commonwealth Society being called the Royal Commonwealth Society does not necessarily help in that regard ...<sup>20</sup>

1.21 Any decision by a member country to become a republic has no implications for their continued membership of the Commonwealth.

## The Commonwealth Secretariat

1.22 The Commonwealth Secretariat, based in London, is the association's main executive agency. Established in 1965, it organises Commonwealth summits, meetings of Ministers, consultative meetings and technical discussions. It is the main agency for multilateral communication among Commonwealth member governments, and also provides technical assistance to help governments in their social and economic development (through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation).

1.23 The Secretariat is headed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, currently Chief Emeka Anyaoku from Nigeria. There have been two previous Secretaries-General – the first was Arnold Smith of Canada; the second Sir Shridath Ramphal of Guyana. The Secretary General is elected by Heads of Government for no more than two four-year terms.

1.24 The Secretary-General is assisted by three Deputy Secretaries-General, responsible respectively for Political Affairs, Economic and Social Affairs, and Development Cooperation. Secretariat staff are drawn from throughout the Commonwealth.

## Australia and the Commonwealth

1.25 During the seminar, Michelle Grattan gave an assessment of the relevance of the Commonwealth since the 1970s up to the Keating period. While she felt 'Keating did not see much relevance in the Commonwealth, ... in the last couple of decades when it faced crunch issues [it] has been seen as useful by Australian prime ministers on both sides of politics as a

---

19 Chan, Stephen, *The Commonwealth in World Politics: A Study of International Action 1965 to 1985*, Lester Crooke Academic Publishing 1988, p. 12.

20 Grattan, Transcript, p. 32.

forum in which they could play a very active role.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Ms Grattan felt that the Department of Foreign Affairs was said to be '... a bit lukewarm about the Commonwealth these days'.<sup>22</sup>

1.26 In response, a DFAT officer at the seminar stated that:

... both the Prime Minister and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade take the Commonwealth very seriously ... the Commonwealth is very much an element of Australia's foreign policy ... [In] a very crowded international agenda ... the Commonwealth does compete in a world where APEC is of great importance, where the United Nations remains of importance, and where a whole network of bilateral and regional engagements ... demand the attention of both the Prime Minister and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ... But, in very specific ways, our engagement with the Commonwealth remains high on the list ...<sup>23</sup>

1.27 Despite these reassurances, in looking at the foreign and trade policy white paper recently released by the Australian Government, there is only one mention of the Commonwealth, and that as part of a general statement noting Australia is active in a number of organisations, including the Commonwealth.<sup>24</sup> While the United Nations, APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the World Trade Organisation are each covered in detail, there is no further mention of the Commonwealth.

**1.28 The Committee is not convinced that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is devoting sufficient attention and emphasis to the Commonwealth, particularly given the potential of the Commonwealth in trade matters. The extent of this potential is examined in Section 3 of this report.**

## **The role of Britain in the Commonwealth**

1.29 The role of Britain in the Commonwealth has evolved over the life of the organisation. While central in the earlier period, as the Commonwealth moved from being a successor to empire to an association of equals, Britain had to adjust to being but one member among many. Their relationship with the Commonwealth was further refined in the period when faced with a choice about joining a united Europe. In the 1980s there was also increasing scepticism in Britain about the direction of the Commonwealth. Some saw it as 'constitutional fiction';<sup>25</sup> others saw it as 'a contemporary manifestation of a dubious past'.<sup>26</sup>

1.30 While some in Britain saw a clear either/or choice between the Commonwealth and the European Union, in retrospect this was obviously not the case. In fact, as Malcolm

---

21 *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

22 *ibid.*, p. 34.

23 Neuhaus, Transcript, p. 41.

24 *In the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy white paper*, 1997, p. 33.

25 McIntyre, W, *The Significance of the Commonwealth 1965-90*, University of Canterbury Press, 1991, p. 20.

26 Groom, A and Taylor, P., *The Commonwealth in the 1980s: Challenges and Opportunities*, Macmillan Press 1984, p. xi.

Fraser argued at the seminar, involvement in the Commonwealth strengthens Britain's role in Europe:

In the European Union, I am sure Britain as a significant member of the Commonwealth would carry greater weight than a Britain without the Commonwealth ... I would see Britain playing a more vigorous role in Europe as being indeed of greater benefit to the Commonwealth, and both associations would be strengthened if they were both operating with some kind of vision and some kind of strength.<sup>27</sup>

1.31 Mr Fraser went on to argue that there is significant value to the United Kingdom in Commonwealth membership, particularly in terms of access to decision makers in fellow Commonwealth countries. In addition:

... there are many practical advantages. Britain's trade with the Commonwealth as a whole gives Britain a very healthy trade surplus [as does Britain's trade with Africa] ...<sup>28</sup>

1.32 The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee released its report on *The Future Role of the Commonwealth* in April 1996. The report deals largely with Britain and its opportunities and prospects in relation to the Commonwealth, with a strong emphasis on investment and trade issues. The report notes that the Commonwealth is 'a changing organisation, both in terms of its membership and its objectives ... [and] seeks to convey the changing and fast-evolving nature of the modern Commonwealth'.<sup>29</sup> The report concludes that 'The old Commonwealth ties could become, for the United Kingdom, the new Commonwealth opportunities.'<sup>30</sup>

1.33 The members of the House of Commons Committee travelled extensively throughout the Commonwealth and in doing so consulted widely. As a result of the bilateral contact between the British Parliament and member countries, the report of that committee has a perspective on the Commonwealth relationship that is somewhat different to that obtained from the seminar the Joint Standing Committee held in August. A list of the major conclusions and recommendations of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee is reproduced at Appendix 4 to this report.

## Public Perceptions of the Commonwealth

1.34 **The Committee felt that the issue of how the Commonwealth is perceived, not only in the general community, but within government and the media, was critical to the level of support the organisation receives, and the value placed on its work.** To this end, the second session of the August seminar was devoted to public perceptions of the Commonwealth. The first speaker, Mr Hugh Craft, set the scene thus:

---

27 Fraser, Transcript, p. 7.

28 *ibid.*

29 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The Future Role of the Commonwealth*, London 1996. p. v.

30 *ibid.*, p. lxii.

... knowledge about the Commonwealth is appalling. This has been confirmed in two recent reports ... The Commonwealth shares the public cynicism endemic to all international organisations. International organisations are sitting targets for criticism. ... Another strong perception that will not go away ... is that Britain still runs what is widely termed 'the British Commonwealth of Nations' ... [The] challenge to counter these perceptions with accurate information about the modern Commonwealth is still with us ...<sup>31</sup>

The difficulty lay, Mr Craft felt, in the '... dearth of relevant, up-to-date, well-targeted information about the Commonwealth in Australia ... anyone searching for substantial and timely material on the Commonwealth has great difficulty in coming by it.'<sup>32</sup>

1.35 This overall assessment was endorsed by Michelle Grattan, who agreed that:

... the public in Australia is not really very aware of the Commonwealth at all in any sort of detail...the Commonwealth has got a lower profile because it is no longer having to address some of the dramatic problems that kept it in the news for so many years, it has faded in people's minds, even in the minds of those who take a very active interest in foreign policy.<sup>33</sup>

Ms Grattan also observed that what profile the Commonwealth does have is reasonably positive, '... an organisation that does no harm and may do something positive by bringing countries together and standing for the right sort of values ...'.<sup>34</sup> Professor Allan Patience identified what he saw as two views of the Commonwealth: the Commonwealth of nostalgia, and the Commonwealth of multilateralism.<sup>35</sup>

1.36 While the Commonwealth does get some coverage in the media at the time of the Heads of Government meetings, and every four years at the time of the Commonwealth Games, coverage of its many other activities is extremely limited and in some cases non-existent. Mr Fraser observed that 'If the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings themselves do not get much reporting in the press, it is not surprising that ... other meetings [e.g. of ministers] also do not get much reporting in the press.' Mr Fraser went on to suggest that the Commonwealth Secretariat make sure that its publications and communiques from those various working groups are more widely disseminated.<sup>36</sup>

1.37 In addition to the above observation that the Commonwealth is seen by some as a neo-colonial body, the Committee notes that there are a number of other misconceptions about the Commonwealth:

- that it is merely a meeting of prime ministers and other heads of government, every two years;

---

31 Craft, Transcript, pp. 28-30.

32 *ibid.*, p. 31.

33 Grattan, Transcript, p. 32.

34 *ibid.*, p. 33.

35 Patience, Transcript, p. 66.

36 Fraser, Transcript, p. 19.

- that any moves by Australia to a republic would see the end of our Commonwealth membership (in fact 32 of the Commonwealth member countries are already republics; Australia is one of only 16 independent states in the Commonwealth to recognise the Queen as Head of State);
- it is an outdated organisation with little to contribute to international society.<sup>37</sup>

1.38 During discussions at the August seminar, it was noted that the Commonwealth itself was concerned about its profile and had commissioned an investigation to assess the opinion within member countries and 'report on what might be done to reinvigorate this'.<sup>38</sup>

1.39 It appears that there is still considerable work to be done by the Commonwealth itself in promoting its work and achievements. At the seminar, Ms Ruth Inall brought to the seminar's attention a publication, *Commonwealth Currents*. Ms Inall argued that 'Good news does not make any headlines, so we do not find out about it unless we get access to these types of publications to find out what is going on'.<sup>39</sup> However, following the seminar, the Committee went to both the Commonwealth Secretariat's web page on the Internet, and also to the site for the publication *Commonwealth Currents*. The *Commonwealth Currents* web site had last been updated on 24 October 1996, and the information there, while of some interest, was not particularly timely. At the Commonwealth Secretariat's web site, while some information was available, a significant proportion of the site was still 'under construction'. With the growth in Internet access as a research and information tool, it is clear that more needs to be done by the Commonwealth Secretariat in this and other areas to promote its work.

1.40 Mr Craft made two suggestions aimed at countering the lack of information about the modern Commonwealth:

- creation of a Commonwealth resources centre; and
- formation of a Commonwealth coalition in Australia, 'a group of eminent Australian persons ... to harness this resources as a political and promotional vehicle to sustain interest and commitment to the Commonwealth'.<sup>40</sup>

The second of these points is similar to suggestions made in 1995 for the development of a corps of 'Commonwealth Good Will Ambassadors', recruited from among high profile individuals.<sup>41</sup>

---

37 Hill, H., 'Australia and the Commonwealth: Missed Opportunities?' in *Current Affairs Bulletin*, October/November 1994.

38 Grattan, Transcript, p. 33, referring to a report by Derek Ingram.

39 Inall, Transcript, p. 55.

40 Craft, Transcript, pp. 31-32.

41 From Saravanamuttoo, N., op cit., pp. 440-441.

1.41 While some reservations were expressed that regardless of actions such as these, the image of the Commonwealth in Australia was unlikely to improve,<sup>42</sup> the Committee believes that both of these ideas have considerable merit.

**Recommendation 1:** That the Australian Government, in consultation with Commonwealth organisations and educational institutions, assist in the establishment of a Commonwealth resources centre.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Australian Government consult with the Commonwealth Secretariat, in the first instance, on the identity and possible tasks for a group of eminent persons who can publicise the work of the Commonwealth.

### Commonwealth Studies

1.42 The question of education about the Commonwealth was raised in a number of seminar sessions. Malcolm Fraser observed:

The Commonwealth could play a greater role in education. People do not learn very much history at school, and I suspect history of the Commonwealth is something which is not taught too much anywhere. If curriculum were developed which taught about the Commonwealth, its evolution and what individual countries have done and been able to achieve, you could write the curriculum so that each country was the centre for itself. It might lead to a better and to a wider understanding of what the Commonwealth does and what it can achieve because you are certainly not going to learn that through the newspapers in any country.<sup>43</sup>

1.43 The issue of Commonwealth studies has been discussed in various forums. The 13th Conference of Commonwealth Education Minister, held in Botswana in July-August 1997, observed that '... recognition of the Commonwealth's contemporary relevance and value among the younger generation was crucial to its survival and strengthening as an institution in the 21st century and beyond ... While recognising difficulties such as overloaded curricula, Ministers expressed a strong desire to make the Commonwealth feature more explicitly within existing school subjects ...'.<sup>44</sup>

1.44 At that ministerial meeting, the Report of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies, *Learning From Each Other: Commonwealth Studies for the 21st Century*, (the Symons report) was presented. The report was commissioned by the 12th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers and undertook considerable consultation in reviewing the teaching of research in Commonwealth studies across the member countries. The Commission recommended:

---

42 Grattan, Transcript, p. 32.

43 Fraser, Transcript, p. 13.

44 Commonwealth Secretariat, 13th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Gabarone, Botswana, 28 July-1 August 1997, *Conclusions and Recommendations*, pp. 3-4.



... a resurgence, a renaissance, of Commonwealth studies...building on existing foundations and bringing Commonwealth studies fully up to date ... The Commission urges that Commonwealth Studies should be built up in universities *throughout* the Commonwealth; that they should concentrate more on the present and the future, and less on the past; and that they should increasingly promote the comparative and co-operative study of contemporary experience, particularly in areas of public policy.

The Report urges that private sector sources ... be encourage to support work in this field.<sup>45</sup>

1.45 The Symons report makes 43 recommendations in total. Included among these is a proposal to establish an Association for Commonwealth Studies 'to draw together more effectively the network of scholars, teachers, graduate students, librarians, archivist, curators and similar resource managers and others interested in Commonwealth studies.'<sup>46</sup> **The Committee believes this would be a very useful step and urges the Australian Government to participate in the establishment of the Association in whatever capacity it is able, and to examine the other recommendations of the Symons report for relevance to Australia.**

---

45 From Presentation by Professor Don Markwell, to the 13th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Botswana, pp. 4-5.

46 Report of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies, *Learning From Each Other: Commonwealth Studies for the 21st Century*, p. 40.

## SECTION 2

### COMMONWEALTH NETWORKS

---

#### Introduction

2.1 In addition to being an association of independent nations, the Commonwealth also provides an opportunity for people, and professional and non-governmental organisations to consult and cooperate on a range of issues. It has been described by the Secretariat as a '... family ... built on a web of inter-governmental, professional and non-governmental organisations and associations, who work separately and together for development and in fostering friendship, understanding, co-operation in the Commonwealth.'<sup>1</sup> As Ms Katharine West, at the August seminar, described it, '... it is less a collective policy organisation than a network which is differentially used by different countries.'<sup>2</sup> HE Professor Patel described the Commonwealth '... basically as one among many concentric circles of associations in which individual nations participate.'<sup>3</sup>

2.2 At the inter-governmental level, member countries:

... work together on a variety of global issues ... Ministers of education, finance, health, law, science, and women's and youth affairs also meet regularly. They discuss and agree on policies, mandates and programmes for action on political and socio-economic issues in line with the Commonwealth's principles and their own priorities and needs ... Other inter-governmental organisations carry out specialised work in the field of education, science and technology and administering the non-governmental network.<sup>4</sup>

#### Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)

2.3 Every two years there is a meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government. This meeting decides the policy and activities of the Commonwealth. The summits have evolved out of the Colonial Conferences of the late 19th century and Imperial Conferences of the early 20th century, where the British Prime Minister and leaders of the Dominions met to discuss, in particular, constitutional issues, foreign affairs, defence and trade. From 1944 the summits were called Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meetings, but were still held in Britain. In 1966, the venue moved to another Commonwealth country for the first time. In 1971 leaders decided to change the name to Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, reflecting the increasing numbers of republics headed by Presidents rather than Prime Ministers. A list of the meetings held to date is at Appendix 3.

---

1 *The Commonwealth Secretariat web site: Commonwealth Links*  
2 West, Transcript, p. 39.  
3 Patel, Transcript, p. 70.  
4 *The Commonwealth Secretariat web site: How It Works.*

2.4 These summits allow Commonwealth leaders:

- to review international political and economic developments to decide, where appropriate, what action the association will take, and then to issue a communique stating the Commonwealth position;
- to examine avenues for Commonwealth cooperation for development – considering both the work done over the previous two years, and agreeing priorities and programmes for the future; and
- to strengthen the sense of the Commonwealth itself, as an association which has characteristics of friendship, business partnership, and 'stabilising ballast in a world of change and turmoil'.<sup>5</sup>

2.5 The deliberations of the Commonwealth summits are private, frank and informal. For the past twenty years, each summit has included a 'retreat' held in relaxed surroundings, 'intended to enhance understanding by allowing leaders to meet as friends'. Agreement at Commonwealth summits is reached by consensus, not voting.<sup>6</sup> Although discussions are private, at the end of every summit Commonwealth leaders issue a communique recording their decisions. The value of such meetings was described as follows:

... heads of government spend some time getting to know each other. There is value in that. If you know a person you can overcome problems, you understand how he thinks and how he will react to certain issues, and all of that promotes a closer degree of cooperation. It is something that does not happen in the United Nations ...<sup>7</sup>

2.6 The Auckland meeting was the first to adopt the reformed CHOGM structure, outlined at the Limassol CHOGM in 1993, whereby the Heads meet for a shorter time (three and a half days, with the weekend retreat taking up two of these). Meetings for officials and others stretch the proceedings to about a week. This shorter meeting time has not been fully supported. At the August seminar, Malcolm Fraser described the shortened meetings, particularly the briefer leaders' retreat, as 'a retrograde step'.<sup>8</sup>

2.7 Attendance at Auckland by Heads of Government was well below average. Of the 50 countries eligible to attend, 33 were represented by heads of state or prime ministers, a smaller proportion of highest-level representatives than at past CHOGMs. Eighteen countries were represented by deputies including all four of the South Asian members.

2.8 The 1997 CHOGM will be held in Edinburgh, and will have the theme of 'trade, investment and development'.

---

5 Gunthorp, D., *op cit.*, p. 33.

6 *ibid.*

7 Fraser, Transcript, p. 8.

8 *ibid.*

**Recommendation 3: That the Prime Minister report on the outcome of the CHOGM meeting, with a view to highlighting the benefits for Australia from such meetings.**

### **Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meetings**

2.9 Commonwealth Heads of Government regional meetings commenced in 1978, but were not continued by the Labor Government in the 1980s. Malcolm Fraser, at the seminar, spoke strongly in support of the concept of regional meetings:

The region covered the Pacific, South-East Asia and South Asia. My rationale for having that meeting ... was that in the major meetings the very small Pacific island states in particular ... do not really participate very much in the debates. The kinds of issues they are concerned with are different from the ones that will be on the global agenda of the Commonwealth, and therefore they are present but do not really take part ... Also, I thought it important that they get a better chance to meet some other people from South-East Asia and South Asia so they could see how vigorously Malaysia and Singapore had grown and developed, and they could learn a little bit by association, something more of the things that need to be done if they are themselves to make progress.<sup>9</sup>

**2.10 Given the growing strength of ASEAN, the significant economic links that exist in the Asia Pacific region, and Australia's growing relationship with those countries in our immediate region, the Committee believes there would be value in a regional forum being established under the auspices of the Commonwealth, to involve Commonwealth countries in South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific.**

**Recommendation 4: That the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Prime Minister and Cabinet examine the question of reinstating a Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting, and determine if there is regional support for its reintroduction.**

### **Meetings of Ministers**

2.11 In addition to the Heads of Government meetings, a range of other meetings involving Commonwealth ministers are held. These include ministers of health, education, agriculture, science and women's affairs. Dr Helen Hill, in commenting on these meetings, observed:

It strikes me that Australia probably does not give a high enough priority to these other meetings of Commonwealth ministers.<sup>10</sup>

2.12 Professor Allan Patience reinforced this idea with an observation that at a recent ministerial meeting, the Australian representation was not at ministerial level.<sup>11</sup> Dr Hill also

---

9 *ibid.*, p. 12.

10 Hill, Transcript, p. 18.

noted that information about these meetings and subsequent Commonwealth activity is often difficult to obtain.<sup>12</sup>

**2.13 The Committee is concerned that there is a perception that Australian ministers are not participating at such Commonwealth meetings. Without taking detailed evidence on the level of participation, the Committee is not prepared to make a specific recommendation on this matter. However, the Committee would encourage the Australian Government to maintain its representation at such meetings at ministerial level.**

## **Unofficial Commonwealth Organisations**

2.14 In addition to the contacts at government level, there is a network of unofficial organisations, professional bodies and voluntary societies, associations that bring together people from all parts of the Commonwealth. There are over 300 of what may be termed Commonwealth non-government organisations (NGOs) (although the point was made at the seminar that it might be more accurate for government organisations to be called 'GOs'.)<sup>13</sup> The distinction between NGOs and the formal structures of the organisation may in fact be unimportant. As HE Professor Patel noted:

If one sees the Commonwealth as a series of networking exercises, whether they take institutional form or whether they take non-institutional form, or formal or informal forms, then we do not have this duality between the NGOs and the formal structures. The networking is important.<sup>14</sup>

2.15 Mr David Tonkin gave a presentation to the seminar in which he highlighted the work of a number of these organisations, including the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Royal Life Saving Society, the Commonwealth Institute, and Sight Savers International (formerly the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind).<sup>15</sup> The diversity of the organisations and the extent of the work that they do is truly remarkable, and the Committee commends these organisations for the linkages they create among the peoples of the Commonwealth.

2.16 Every four years the Commonwealth Foundation brings together NGO leaders from all parts of the Commonwealth to participate in the Commonwealth NGO Forum which formulates recommendations presented to the CHOGM held in the same year. Two NGO Forums have been held (the first prior to Harare and the second prior to the Auckland CHOGM). The main theme of the 1995 Forum was the eradication of poverty. NGOs will again meet prior to the Edinburgh Forum in 1997.

## **Education**

---

11 Patience, Transcript, p. 19.  
12 Hill, Transcript, pp. 18-19.  
13 Tonkin, Transcript, p. 50.  
14 Patel, Transcript, p. 70.  
15 Tonkin, Transcript, pp. 50-52.

2.17 At the August seminar, some time was devoted to discussion of education in the context of the Commonwealth. As Mr Frank Hambly observed, 'education programs and organisations have been among the strongest of the threads which have held the Commonwealth together over the years. But ... I have observed in recent years that those threads are starting to wear pretty thin as we approach the 21st century.'<sup>16</sup>

2.18 Despite a specific invitation to attend the August seminar, the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs did not send a representative. This was unfortunate in that a number of issues that arose during the course of the discussion would have benefited from some input from those immediately involved in education issues on behalf of the Australian Government.

2.19 The Commonwealth Secretariat maintains an education division and oversees a range of education programs. Among these is the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, created in 1959, and designed to enable 'Commonwealth students of high intellectual promise to pursue, principally, postgraduate studies in Commonwealth countries other than their own, so that when they returned home they could make a distinctive contribution to life in their own countries and to mutual understanding of the Commonwealth.'<sup>17</sup> Australia is one of 14 countries participating in the scheme, and an additional five countries have indicated they will join. Australia funds some 80 awards for study in Australia; in comparison there are just over 100 Australian students studying abroad on awards offered by other Commonwealth countries. The seminar was also informed that in 1997, there were 27 new awards granted for study in Australia and 42 new awards were granted for Australians to study in the United Kingdom and three in Canada.<sup>18</sup>

2.20 Mr Hambly also raised at the seminar the issue of full cost tuition fees for overseas students, and noted that the Commonwealth Secretariat's Standing Committee on Student Mobility had recommended fees concessions for students from Commonwealth countries, a recommendation not accepted by the Commonwealth Education Conference and CHOGM. Mr Hambly noted that while a few countries, including Australia, have introduced scholarships to assist some international students, these awards are available for students from all countries, and none are specifically earmarked for students from Commonwealth countries.<sup>19</sup> The rationale for improving the access of students from Commonwealth countries is that:

... the networks, the methodologies, the products, the ways of thinking, the ways of going about doing business that one learns at university are then accessed in professional life with the obvious trade and other

commercial advantages. It does seem to be fairly short-sighted if a government pursues policy that does not actually permit that to happen.<sup>20</sup>

---

16 Hambly, Transcript, p. 44.

17 *ibid.*, p. 45.

18 *ibid.*

19 *ibid.*, p. 46.

20 Craft, Transcript, p. 56.

**2.21** The Committee believes that the linkages that are developed in this way are invaluable. Given the implications of rising costs in obtaining a tertiary education, and the value of previous schemes such as the Colombo Plan, the Committee believes that some specific assistance should be given to students from Commonwealth countries seeking to obtain tertiary and post-graduate qualifications.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Australian Government, as part of its aid program, set aside a defined number of scholarships for students from Commonwealth countries to assist with tertiary and post-graduate education in Australia.

**2.22** The Association of Commonwealth Universities was set up in 1913 and has a membership of over 500 universities throughout the Commonwealth. All Australian universities are members of the ACU. Mr Hambly noted that questions were now being asked about the benefits of membership:

These questions are being asked because of the increasing regionalisation, internationalisation and globalisation of universities worldwide. There are the questions of disparity between the quality of the universities within the Commonwealth, the withdrawal from membership, already, by a number of Canadian and British universities, the increasing cost of membership in the face of financial stringency and the desire of universities to form alliances with a wider range of universities around the world, and certainly beyond the Commonwealth, particularly those with whom they feel they can benchmark themselves.<sup>21</sup>

**2.23** Mr Hambly concluded by observing that '... inevitably, and I believe, irreversibly, to the Australian universities, the Commonwealth of Nations and the Association of Commonwealth Universities in particular, while important networks, are not now as significant groupings as they once were'.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Commonwealth of Learning**

**2.24** Established by Heads of Government in 1988, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is financed by voluntary pledges from governments and support from external agencies. Its ultimate aim is 'to enable any seeker after knowledge and skills, anywhere in the Commonwealth, to study (via local distance learning institutions and the COL) through the best courses in that field available anywhere in the Commonwealth. To achieve the long-

term aim, the COL aims to raise teaching and technological standards in Commonwealth distance learning institutions, promote co-operation among universities and colleges, and develop appropriate courses and systems.<sup>23</sup>

---

21 Hambly, Transcript, p. 47.

22 *ibid.*, p. 49.

23 Gunthorp, D., *op cit.*, p. 141.

## The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

2.25 The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) was founded in 1911 and is among the oldest Commonwealth organisations. It aims to promote the continuing evolution of existing democratic institutions and assist nations in their transition to democratically elected and responsible government. It also acts as a professional development body for parliamentarians. CPA branches exist in 130 national, provincial and territorial parliaments, with a membership of over 14 000 parliamentarians.<sup>24</sup> Australia is very active in the CPA, both in Commonwealth-wide and regional activities.

2.26 The CPA aims to provide a forum for the discussion of matters of common parliamentary interest; to disseminate information on parliamentary institutions and spread knowledge of constitutional, legislative, economic, social and cultural systems. It holds an annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, and in addition hold annual plenary conferences, regional conferences and parliamentary seminars. Its publication, *The Parliamentarian*, is published quarterly.

2.27 The Association is financed by membership fees levied on each branch and based on the number of delegates and secretaries officially entitled to attend the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, modified by some historical precedents.<sup>25</sup> The Australian Commonwealth Parliament branch of the CPA created a trust fund following the CPA conference held in Australia in 1988, into which surplus funds from the conference were deposited. Those funds are used to provide assistance to the Parliaments of the Pacific Island countries.<sup>26</sup>

2.28 One of the strengths of the CPA is that because national, state and provincial parliaments are members, there are a number of very small parliaments amongst them.

I believe that the larger countries have been significant in assisting the smaller ones to develop the committee systems and the structure of how they are to operate within a Westminster style system, frequently in a social environment where the Westminster concept is totally at variance with the structure of their societies as they functioned previously ... In addition, each year at the annual conference there is a small countries conference where the smaller members can meet on their own and discuss the matters particularly of concern to them.<sup>27</sup>

2.29 Another important function was the opportunity the CPA provided for the clerks of the various parliaments to meet and discuss parliamentary procedural issues on a regular basis.<sup>28</sup>

**2.30 The Committee commends the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association for the assistance it provides to its smaller member parliaments, and for the role it plays**

---

24 Reid, Transcript, p. 60.

25 Donahoe, Arthur, 'The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association', in *The Round Table*, April 1996, p. 169.

26 Reid, Transcript, p. 64.

27 *ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

28 *ibid.*, p. 61.



**in providing a forum for parliamentarians from a wide range of backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas.**

**Recommendation 6: That the Australian branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association encourage it to continue as a forum promoting democratic values, the rule of law and freedom of the press.**

## **Sport**

2.31 To the general public, one of the most visible signs of the Commonwealth is the Commonwealth Games, which are held every four years. The changes in the title of the games reflects the evolution and relationship of the member states of the Commonwealth. The first games, held in Canada in 1930, were called the British Empire Games. In 1954 the title was changed to the British Empire and Commonwealth Games, in 1966 to the British Commonwealth Games, and in 1978, to the Commonwealth Games.<sup>29</sup> The Commonwealth Games Federation links the national Commonwealth Games Associations and establishes rules and regulations for the conduct of the Games.

2.32 The 16th Commonwealth Games will be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1998. An associated cultural festival will also be held at the same time. Sport is an important and popular source of linkages within the Commonwealth, and sport has been used to '...promote Commonwealth values, youth development through sport, the sharing of sport resources and expertise among member nations ...'.<sup>30</sup>

2.33 The high profile of the Commonwealth Games was stressed by Mr Arthur Tunstall at the seminar, who noted that the Commonwealth Games in 1998 will receive considerable coverage and that '... there will be more public knowledge of the Commonwealth and what it means when the games are being held ...'.<sup>31</sup>

**Recommendation 7: That the Australian Government continue to support the Commonwealth Games Association, as a means of fostering closer contact throughout the Commonwealth, and encouraging all member states to meet in friendly competition.**

## **The Future of NGOs**

2.34 The multiplicity of NGOs provides an extensive network of organisations and individuals throughout the Commonwealth. While many NGOs have their origins in the more developed countries of the Commonwealth, the move to all participating as equal partners was noted at the seminar. Ms Inall, in discussing the creation of the Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres, highlighted the fact that she saw 'an entirely new spirit,

---

29 Gunthorp, D., op cit., p. 151.

30 'Looking to the Auckland CHOGM', editorial in *The Round Table*, October 1995, p. vii.

31 Tunstall, Transcript, p. 36.

if you like. The difference was that there was nobody on the giving end and there was nobody on the taking end, but it was a meeting of partners who were exploring in what way we could assist each other.<sup>32</sup>

**2.35** The Committee believes that this spirit of partnership is essential if these organisations are to continue to develop and meet the changing needs of all participants. The Committee also notes the valuable role such NGOs can play in assisting governments in developing countries to assist their populations to a better standard of living.

**Recommendation 8:** That the Australian Government continue its support of Commonwealth NGOs in their work in the less developed Commonwealth member countries.

---

32 Inall, Transcript, p. 68.

## SECTION 3

### AID, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

---

3.1 In looking at general perceptions of the Commonwealth, one of the least acknowledged aspects of the Commonwealth is the economic aspect. Except for those most closely involved in the work of the Commonwealth, few in the general community are aware of the significant opportunities that are provided by the Commonwealth linkages. The seminar examined this matter in a session addressed by HE Professor H Patel, High Commission for Zimbabwe, and academic and author Ms Katharine West.

#### Trade relations

3.2 The importance of the economic dimension of the Commonwealth has been recognised in the setting of the theme of the 1997 CHOGM: trade, investment and development matters. The significance of the Commonwealth in economic issues was clearly acknowledged in the 1996 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report:

While it is still the case that some members of the Commonwealth are amongst the poorest in the world and rightly deserve the help and support of the richer developed world, the organisation now also contains some of the world's fastest growing economies and even some of the richest ... [T]he Commonwealth today embraces what may well turn out to be some of the world's fastest growing markets ... Could it be ... that the very features which were seen by some as the Commonwealth's weaknesses in a previous era – such as its trans-regional character and its diversity – could now prove to be its strengths?<sup>1</sup>

#### Regional and Transregional networking

3.3 At the August seminar, Ms West spoke of the importance of the Commonwealth as economies became more globalised and competitive, providing as it does opportunities for regional and transregional networking. As Ms West observed:

Even some of the most sceptical member states are now expressing far more positive perceptions of the Commonwealth as a low cost, ready-made, transregional network – or series of networks – through which members in one region can improve their capacity to benefit from economic and diplomatic opportunities as well in other regions of the world.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *op cit.*, p. vi.

2 West, Transcript, p. 75.

3.4 Ms West drew attention to the use that Malaysia and Singapore have made of the Commonwealth networks, '... the South-East Asian hub, effectively liaising in a mutually beneficial way with the southern African hub.'<sup>3</sup> In addition, Ms West noted the use Canada had made of Commonwealth networks for transregional relations with fellow Commonwealth members in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa.<sup>4</sup>

3.5 Ms West argued that the Commonwealth's '... combination of internal and external links is the Commonwealth's main economic and diplomatic asset. A country that ignores the potential networking ability of the Commonwealth is diplomatically, as well as economically, ill advised and unintelligent.'<sup>5</sup>

3.6 Ms West also argued that '... the most successful strategies need to use, in a mutually reinforcing way, three kinds of economic networks: bilateral, regional and transregional. This mutually reinforcing three-pronged approach to policy making represents the way of the future. It represents the way Malaysia and Singapore are thinking.'<sup>6</sup> In cautioning against adopting simply a regional approach to trade, Ms West observed:

More than any other international association, the Commonwealth has both regional and transregional links in abundance ... The question is the use made of them.<sup>7</sup>

... While close cooperation with regional neighbours is obviously vital for Australia and for all countries, Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth, regional cooperation will not in itself, in today's transregional economy, ensure that a country remains competitive in world terms. Today's global economy is paradoxically not only more regionalised than ever before but also more transregionalised than ever before. Skilful countries are those that understand this reality and understand the delicate balancing act that must always occur between regional and transregional strategies, which have to be combined with bilateral strategies in a mutually reinforcing way and in a way that is not simply agreed to by business but agreed to by bipartisan politics.<sup>8</sup>

3.7 Elements in consolidating the closer Commonwealth links include the Commonwealth business culture, and the Commonwealth's many ethnic diaspora networks:

Within the uniting framework of the Commonwealth business culture, we have a multi-diaspora Commonwealth – a multicultural Commonwealth within a uniting, English speaking, Commonwealth business culture. We have the best of both worlds – unity where it is needed for economic enterprises, and diversity including the British diaspora, the African diaspora, the potentially mighty Indian diaspora and the economically pivotal Chinese diaspora network ...

---

3 *ibid.*, p. 76.

4 *ibid.*, p. 78.

5 *ibid.*, p. 76.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*, p. 75.

8 *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

Within the Commonwealth, such ethnic networks have been united by the overarching, critically important business culture, based on a shared English language, on similar administrative and educational systems, on shared legal, commercial, accountancy and other financial practices. The Commonwealth business culture, then, facilitates the full range of economic relations among Commonwealth countries that, in other cultural respects, may be very different.<sup>9</sup>

3.8 Professor Patel noted that meetings of Commonwealth Trade Ministers have ceased and suggested that it might be worthwhile to look at either reviving those meetings or combining them with the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meetings.<sup>10</sup> **While the Committee is not convinced about combining meetings of Commonwealth Trade and Finance Ministers, the Committee does believe that there may be a useful role to be played regionally by meetings of Commonwealth Trade Ministers. Such meetings would complement the work being done in APEC, AFTA and through CER and would provide a truly regional focus.**

**Recommendation 9: That the Australian Minister for Trade together with his regional Commonwealth counterparts consider establishing regular meetings of regional Commonwealth Trade Ministers.**

3.9 The vitality of the economic contacts and linkages among Commonwealth countries was noted at the seminar, with mention being made of the Commonwealth Development Corporation, the Commonwealth Africa Investment Fund, the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management, the Commonwealth Business Network and the Commonwealth Network on Information Technology.<sup>11</sup>

## **Development Assistance**

3.10 While the Commonwealth contains some of the richest countries of the world, and countries with extremely high economic growth rates, it also includes some of the poorest countries of the world. There are great variations in per capita income, economic strength, and ability to participate in international trade and investment across Commonwealth countries. Of the 53 member countries, some 29 are defined as 'small states' (ie having populations of less than 1 million), and 14 have fewer than 200 000 people. Small states are a continuing focus of the Commonwealth's work and now receive about 65 per cent of Commonwealth technical assistance.

3.11 These small countries, often island countries, face a number of economic problems:

---

9 *ibid.*, p. 79.

10 Patel, Transcript, pp. 74-75.

11 *ibid.*, pp. 71-73.

... many of them are ... structurally constrained in terms of their opportunities for economic manoeuvring. Industrialization is restricted by the small size of domestic markets, difficulties in penetrating foreign markets and inadequate supplies of local raw material for processing industries. In today's world of technology, while many small states have an educated and alert labour force, they have neither the investment in telecommunications technology nor computers to take advantage of new opportunities in the service industries. Even if they have the money to invest in technology and education, it would take a full generation before they would be able to compete. And, then, only if they keep wages low.<sup>12</sup>

3.12 Prior to the Auckland CHOGM the Ministerial Group on Small States met, and discussions focused on sustainable development of small states, their security concerns, and small states in the international trading system.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation**

3.13 The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) was established in 1971, and provides managerial, professional and technical assistance for economic and social development in Commonwealth developing countries. Governments contribute to the fund on a voluntary basis. As noted earlier in this report, Australia contributed \$8.2 million to the Fund in 1996-97.

3.14 In looking at development assistance, there was agreement that aid was much more than simply an issue of money. Ms West argued that '... some of the best forms of aid will increasingly be linked to investment, through developing the skills of the local community where the investment occurs ... [and will not] be directed aid but the outcome of cooperative planning for the mutual benefit of donor and recipient.'<sup>14</sup> HE Professor Patel also noted the approach being taken by some Commonwealth countries:

Malaysia and Singapore ... do not believe in aid in terms of cash, but in terms of training which is also very important. For example, they participate very heavily in the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. Singapore alone ... trains I think about 2,000 non-Singaporeans per annum, including people from the Commonwealth...<sup>15</sup>

3.15 For many countries, improved access to international trade and markets would be preferable than the traditional forms of development assistance. Mr Fraser argued that there is scope for the Commonwealth to expand its role and to argue for better access for countries with poor access to international trade, in particular many of the African countries.

---

12 Sanders, R M., 'The Commonwealth must not wake up feeling terrible' in *The Round Table*, July 1996, p. 289.

13 'Auckland: the *kia kaha* CHOGM', editorial in *The Round Table*, January 1996, p. ix.

14 West, Transcript, p. 80.

15 Patel, Transcript, pp. 73-74.

3.16 In Malcolm Fraser's opinion:

Over the years, during various trade negotiations, the Commonwealth has done more to help developing countries, especially developing countries in Africa, than the specialist United Nations body designed to help them, UNCTAD ... The Commonwealth has aid programs and technical cooperation programs which would all benefit from extra resources being made available ... the programs are good, they are helpful, they are economically run ...<sup>16</sup>

3.17 Professor Patel also commented on this issue, noting that:

... it is important to have consensus on the terms of trade. Poorer countries in the Commonwealth, primary commodity producers in the Commonwealth, as in other, non-Commonwealth countries, do have problems in terms of access to markets and in terms of trade for their commodities. And the terms of trade again has been animating the Commonwealth and should continue to animate the Commonwealth.<sup>17</sup>

**3.18 While the Committee acknowledges that the Commonwealth is not a trading bloc as such, and the days of Commonwealth preferences are long gone, there may be potential for Commonwealth countries to assist each other in improving access to markets (see for example Recommendation 9 regarding meetings of Trade Ministers in our region).**

---

16 Fraser, Transcript, p. 11.

17 Patel, Transcript, p. 73.

## SECTION 4

# THE COMMONWEALTH, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

---

### Introduction

4.1 The final session of the seminar was on the subject of the Commonwealth, good governance and human rights. In any examination of the role the Commonwealth might play in enhancing and protecting human rights, the question must be asked whether the member nations believe this is an appropriate role for such a body. As noted earlier in this report, the Commonwealth is a unique organisation, being:

... a voluntary association of independent sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interest of their people and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace.<sup>1</sup>

4.2 The Commonwealth does not have a legal regime in place to address human rights issues, but such concerns were central the Singapore Declaration (1971), the Harare Declaration (1991) and most recently the Millbrook Action Plan arising from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Auckland (1995).

4.3 The Singapore Declaration sought to strengthen the influence of the United Nations for international peace and security; to strive to promote institutions and guarantees for personal freedom under law; to combat racial prejudice and colonialism; to overcome poverty, ignorance and disease; and to achieve a more equitable international society. These principles were reaffirmed in the Harare Declaration, described by the Commonwealth Secretary General as a 'landmark to guide our association'. In that Declaration, the Heads of Government reaffirmed:

their commitment to equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief; to equality for women; and to the provision of universal access to education for their populations. They pledged the Commonwealth to work with renewed vigour in the protection and promotion of the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth – democracy, the rule of law, just and honest government, and fundamental human rights; and they decided on continuing action to help end apartheid and bring democracy to South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 *The Declaration of Commonwealth Principles*, para 1.

2 Anyaoku, Chief Emeka, 'Foreword' in Larby, P M and Hannam, H., *The Commonwealth*, Transaction Publishers.



4.4 Commonwealth leaders therefore clearly see a role for the body in the promotion and protection of human rights. However, it was not until the 1980s that some concrete steps were taken to put into practice the Commonwealth stated commitment to human rights. A proposal by The Gambia in the late 1970s for a Commonwealth Human Rights Commission did not proceed, and member states tended to pursue strategies for human rights through other associations.<sup>3</sup>

4.5 Organisationally, the Commonwealth moved in the late 1980s to strengthen its institutional capacity in the area of human rights by establishing a Human Rights Unit within the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Unit helps:

... governments to set up or strengthen their national institutions and other mechanisms for the protection of human rights. Set up following the Melbourne CHOGM, the Unit organises training workshops on human rights and also facilitates the exchange of information and teaching materials among member countries.<sup>4</sup>

4.6 The Secretariat has provided constitutional, legal and electoral experts, observed elections when requested, and has also provided its good offices when requested to help promote the peace and stability required for democracy to be established. It did not, however, establish a mechanism for compliance and for monitoring the capacity of governments to deal with violations of human rights.<sup>5</sup> This was in line with a direction from member governments that the Commonwealth should focus on 'promotion and not on protection' in regard to human rights.<sup>6</sup>

4.7 The Committee believes that the emphasis should be on promoting democratic institutions, the rule of law, freedom of the press etc. A number of Commonwealth member countries have well-developed units within their own national government bureaucracies dealing with human rights issues, and there may be some scope for the Commonwealth to draw upon those resources in pursuing a wider agenda of human rights.

**Recommendation 10: That the Australian Government raise with other Commonwealth members the strengthening of the role and resources of the Human Rights Unit within the Secretariat, to enable it to take a wider approach to the promotion and protection of human rights.**

4.8 The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) was established in 1987 by five Commonwealth non-governmental organisations responsible for law, medicine, media, trade unions and legal education. This broadly representative group was united in its commitment to human rights, and a belief that the Commonwealth framework should be more effective in enhancing human rights for its citizens. In 1996 the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association also became a member. CHRI has focussed on project cooperation among NGOs, convening conferences and workshops on human rights as well as joint

---

3 CHRI., *Put Our World to Rights: Towards a Commonwealth Human Rights Policy*, p. 5.

4 Gunthorp, D., *op cit.*, p. 119.

5 Wells, Transcript, p. 96.

6 Craft, Transcript, p. 98.

projects involving education, research and publications. Its initial headquarters was London which maintains an advisory committee but its headquarters was moved to New Delhi in 1994 and it is planned to rotate the secretariat every five years to maximise opportunity to work with human rights advocates in different regions of the Commonwealth.

4.9 One of the major functions of the CHRI is its report to CHOGM every two years as part of its efforts to monitor member states' progress in addressing the human rights commitments made in Harare in 1992.<sup>7</sup>

4.10 The attention of Commonwealth Heads of Governments was focused in an acute way at the 1995 Auckland CHOGM by concerns over human rights in a number of member countries. Despite a number of positive moves by member countries since the Harare CHOGM in 1991, moving from military or one-party states to embrace multi-party democracy, others had moved in the opposite direction. Attention at Auckland was focused in particular on Nigeria and the execution of Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots. Nigeria's membership of the Commonwealth was suspended, pending a return to compliance with the Harare principles.

4.11 The concern of the Auckland CHOGM participants was further reflected in the Millbrook Action Plan<sup>8</sup>, which seeks to promote and protect the Commonwealth's core values, in three ways: advancing Commonwealth fundamental political values; promoting sustainable development; and facilitating consensus building. A number of specific measures were identified to assist in achieving fundamental values, including assistance in creating and building the capacity of institutions; assistance in constitutional and legal matters; assistance in electoral matters; observation of elections; strengthening the rule of law and promoting the independence of the judiciary; public service reform, and other activities to strengthen democratic culture and effective parliamentary practices<sup>9</sup>

4.12 Commonwealth Heads of Government also decided to establish a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) on the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, to deal with serious or persistent violations of the principles contained in the Harare Declaration. Foreign Ministers of eight Commonwealth countries (Britain, Canada, Ghana, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe) form the group, and its task is to assess the nature of the infringement and recommend measures for collective Commonwealth action, with the aim of restoration of democracy and constitutional rule. CMAG has been considering the cases of Nigeria, Sierra Leone and The Gambia and will report to CHOGM in October 1997. The future of CMAG is also up for review at the Edinburgh CHOGM. Ms Gilmore expressed the hope that CMAG would become:

... a durable mechanism which does have the capacity to quite rightly build on the promotional work of the past decade and emerge more confidently into questions of investigation, compliance and encouragement of member states to adhere to the universal standard.<sup>10</sup>

---

7 Reynolds, Transcript, p. 85.

8 The Millbrook Commonwealth Action Program on the Harare Commonwealth Declaration.

9 Anyaoku, Chief Emeka, 'The Commonwealth - ready to meet the challenges of the future', in *The Commonwealth Ministers Reference Book 1996/97*, Kensington Publications.

10 Gilmore, Transcript, p. 97.

4.13 The suspension of Nigeria's membership of the Commonwealth (with the possibility of expulsion at some future time) was an historic decision for the Commonwealth, and marked what some saw as a major turning point towards a 'more rules- or norms-based Commonwealth'.<sup>11</sup> However, it remains to be seen whether the united front shown at Auckland will be maintained at Edinburgh. There have been reports that the Action Group is divided in its approach to Nigeria – that some are losing patience with Nigeria's continued prevarications, and believe that only tougher action will result in any change; others, particularly other African countries, are concerned at the precedent of intervention into a country's affairs that might be set should the Commonwealth attempt to take further action.<sup>12</sup>

## Human Rights Records of Members

4.14 The human rights record of many Commonwealth countries is poor. Although it is unwise to generalise, there are difficulties in many member states, ranging from comparatively minor abuses (if such a thing exists) to appalling violations of the most basic of human rights. As the seminar was told, 'the contemporary commonplace disregard for human rights means that a post-apartheid, post-colonial Commonwealth offers cold comfort to common people'.<sup>13</sup> Ms Gilmore, National Director of Amnesty International, documented a number of specific human rights abuses across a range of Commonwealth countries.<sup>14</sup> She also noted the wide variation among Commonwealth countries in regard to the international agreements on human rights:

The rate of ratification of key human rights instruments across the body of the Commonwealth of Nations is variable, to say the least. While the Commonwealth supports as a whole the 1993 Vienna declaration on human rights, only 32 of its members have ratified or are signatory to the International covenant on Civil and Political Rights ... Thirty Commonwealth countries have ratified or are signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, but only 19 have chosen to support the convention against torture. Amnesty International's concern is not with the common explanation for these contradictions but with their common consequences.<sup>15</sup>

4.15 Ms Gilmore spoke of Amnesty's wish to see the Commonwealth adopt and enforce a common standard of human rights:

... Amnesty would urge the Commonwealth to find a firm and indefatigable common voice with which to denounce violations of

---

11 'Auckland: the *kia kaha* CHOGM', editorial in *The Round Table*, January 1996, p. vi

12 'Commonwealth weakness: the message from New York to Nigeria must be clear' in *The Times*, 28 September 1996.

13 Gilmore, Transcript, p. 93.

14 *ibid.*, pp. 91-93.

15 *ibid.*, p. 91.

human rights in member states, with which to call for each member of the Commonwealth to immediately address the violations of human rights in their own countries ... [We aspire] for the Commonwealth of the future only the observance of the principles of the past – those very principles which distinguish the grouping and which its members themselves have drafted and endorsed ...

Spell out clearly and in detail the responsibilities of membership in relation to respect for human rights. Establish a permanent mechanism to assess members' compliance with international and Commonwealth human rights principles. Make specific and widely known the steps the Commonwealth will take when members violate these human rights standards, including investigation methods and public denouncement of violations as perpetrated.<sup>16</sup>

4.16 The Commonwealth, for all of its imperfections, has had significant success in the past, and continues to make a major contribution through the monitoring of the electoral process in member countries, and in the provision of training and education. At the seminar, Malcolm Fraser observed that:

The Commonwealth has a stronger capacity to promote democratic values in countries where democratic values are weak than perhaps it has had.<sup>17</sup>

4.17 There was some debate at the August seminar about the concept of human rights and that of duties and obligations. Mr Michael Ong observed that under Islam, there are certain duties to be fulfilled before you are entitled to any rights; rights do not exist in a vacuum. However, there was general agreement at the seminar that there are a number of basic human rights that exist for all people: freedom from torture, extra-judicial killings, detention without trial to name just a few.

## Conclusion

**The Commonwealth has moved increasingly to a more active role in human rights issues. The challenge facing the Commonwealth is whether it should attempt to set and enforce basic standards of behaviour for its member states, or attempt to ameliorate unacceptable behaviour by members through behind-the-scenes diplomacy. If the Commonwealth is to be an effective organisation, and promote ideals of good governance and cooperation, it may well find it will need to replace rhetoric with more concrete action. At issue will be whether such action will alter the basic nature of the Commonwealth and the way in which its individual members relate to each other.**

4.18 **The Commonwealth is an important vehicle for political, economic, social, cultural and sporting contact and considerable benefits accrue to Australia from its membership. The Committee encourages the Australian government to maximise the advantages that arise from our membership for the benefit of Australia as a whole.**

---

16 *ibid.*, p. 93.

17 Fraser, Transcript, p. 8.