

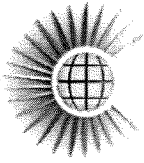


Submission No 11

**Review of Australia's Relationship with the
Countries of Africa**

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Convenor

Organisation: Commonwealth Round Table in Australia



Commonwealth Round Table
in Australia

Submission No: 11
Date Received: 11/12/09
Secretary:

MAWSON ACT 2607

Senator Michael Forshaw
Chairman
Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2000

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Africa

Submission by the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia
*Australia, the Commonwealth and Africa:
Existing channels, untapped potential*

I attach for the consideration of your Committee a submission by the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA) relating to the above inquiry.

The CRTA would be pleased to respond to any questions the Committee may have on the role of Australia's Commonwealth links in its future relations with African countries. We would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee to elaborate on the issues raised in our submission.

If further details are required please feel free to contact me on [REDACTED] or Hugh Craft [REDACTED]

With best wishes for your work.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

(Prof. Anthony Low AO)
Convener

11 December 2009

The Chairman
Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH AFRICA

Submission of the Commonwealth Roundtable in Australia

Australia, the Commonwealth and Africa: Existing channels, untapped potential

In this the 60th anniversary of the founding of the modern Commonwealth of nations (The Commonwealth), the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA) presents this submission to the Committee setting out four ways in which Australia's membership of the Commonwealth is relevant to future Australian relationships with Africa:

1. POLITICS

With 53 nations, Africa matters. In advancing issues of global concern, increased Australian credibility, goodwill and influence in Africa leverages Australia's ability to shape global issues of importance to us. In the Commonwealth, and in particular in CHOGM, Australia has an existing, well-established and congenial multilateral forum through which to directly engage well over a third of Africa's nations and two of its most important powers, South Africa and Nigeria.

Australia is an important member of the Commonwealth and the 3rd largest financial contributor to the organisation. It has just secured the hosting of the next Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth in 2011 which will make the Australian Prime Minister the Chair of the organisation from 2011-2013. The Australian Foreign Minister is a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), the body that is responsible for monitoring the performance of Commonwealth countries on democracy and good governance. In no other major global forum does Australia enjoy such comparative influence. Revitalising its Commonwealth connections will enable Australia to build African support around shared concerns through Commonwealth consensus, as demonstrated on climate change at the 2009 CHOGM.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) is a unique tool for encouraging adherence to international standards on democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights. It matters to Australia to ensure African support on CMAG issues: this can assist in advancing Australia's political concerns and interests in

relation to non-African situations such as Fiji and Pakistan, as well as demonstrating Australian interest in situations of concern to Africa, from Zimbabwe to the Gambia.

2. PEOPLE

The Commonwealth is about much more than CHOGM or CMAG: it is also a rich and vibrant bundle of civil society networks and vital people-to-people links. Australians are important members of bodies such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA), the Magistrates and Judges Association (CMJA), and the Local Government Forum (CLGF). These resilient and established groupings facilitate advocacy and oversight on important issues of principle. They also provide channels for developing relationships and pursuing a wide variety of objectives. African membership of Commonwealth civil society is important: Australian support and interest provides a ready-made network of like-minded individuals and groups able to speak up on issues of concern to Australia.

CHOGM summits are today paralleled by the Commonwealth Peoples Forum, Business Forum and Youth Forum. All these events will bring strong African participation to Perth in 2011, providing a unique opportunity for advancing our people to people and business links with the continent, and engaging a new generation of Africans.

In particular, the CRTA would recommend to the Committee that it consider how the Commonwealth Parliamentarians Association represents an existing, under-utilised mechanism – not open to many other countries – for opening and improving bilateral relationships in African countries.

3. BUSINESS

Australia and Australian businesses' existing economic relations with Africa are primarily with Commonwealth countries, as demonstrated in the 2008 Lowy Institute Report *Into Africa*. Africa can be a challenging but rewarding investment environment, and Australian investment is growing, in particular in the mining and mining services sectors. The English language, shared legal traditions and institutions, and other cultural legacies make doing business in Commonwealth African countries a relatively familiar experience for Australian enterprises. Commonwealth African countries can become bases for regional business opportunities including in non-Commonwealth African countries. Australia is uniquely placed with its leading edge expertise in mining and agriculture to engage Africa on these crucial sectors of future economic development.

The Commonwealth connection is one advantage Australia has over other investors interested in African resources and markets. The current chair of the Commonwealth Business Council is an Australian. More attention ought to be paid to maximising the Commonwealth connection in strategies to advance Australian business relations in Africa. In addition, responsible Australian business activity in Commonwealth Africa

can have a more sustainable and empowering ‘development’ effect than aid programmes.

4. DEVELOPMENT

Australia’s aid programme to African countries is changing and growing. More proactive engagement in various Commonwealth forums, events and mechanisms would help Australian policy-makers better conceptualise and sharpen our development assistance programmes in Africa and more generally. In particular, Commonwealth thematic Ministerial-level meetings (on health, gender, education, law and so on) provide excellent venues for building direct relationships with African counterparts for furtherance of bilateral assistance programmes.

The Commonwealth has a key role in addressing human resource development through its path-finding CFTC programs and university cooperation activities to strengthen research and training institutions in Commonwealth Africa which will be pivotal to achieving such an ambitious outcome. One such area is in food security. As hard as it may be to imagine it now, Africa is potentially a major global food bowl. There is a significant opportunity for Australia to take a leadership role within the Commonwealth to help address issues of food security in Africa.

Overview: ‘existing channels: untapped potential’

The Commonwealth represents an existing, still largely untapped resource for Australia, a leading member. On bilateral issues with African countries, it provides the platform of familiar shared values, and a variety of people-to-people links. On a continental and global level, Australia increasingly views itself as a ‘middle power’ building consensus on global issues, including through multilateral forums. African support is crucial to agreement and action on global concerns, and the Commonwealth is a means to shaping and harnessing African support. Perth is in many respects Australia’s ‘gateway’ to Africa and the Perth CHOGM 2011 provides a unique opportunity to utilise the Commonwealth link with Africa to its full.

**Canberra
11 December 2009.**

For further details on the CRTA visit <http://www.crt.net.au>