

Commonwealth News

SUMMER 2013-14

Newsletter of the Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Inc.

Patron: Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC, CVO, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

FROM THE RETIRING PRESIDENT . . .

This is my final message to RCS members as President, after an extended term in that role.

Eight years ago, the RCS in the ACT was on the brink of closure. At the AGM in February 2006 a motion for the dissolution of the Society was on the agenda. This situation had arisen due to diminishing support from an ageing membership, flagging enthusiasm, and no one coming forward to take on leadership roles.

In these desperate circumstances, a small group of people stepped up, and, since then, have worked together to ensure the survival of the RCS in Canberra—essentially keeping afloat an organisation with its origins in the 19th century.

But the effort has been made in the belief that Commonwealth values are contemporary, relevant, and worth standing up for—no more

so than in the present international climate. I believe we can continue to make steady progress and that the Council and members can take pride in our continuing success.

There have been both negative and positive developments during the past year. On the negative side, one has been the virtual collapse of the worldwide role of the RCS London with disposal of its London headquarters and the retraction of its high profile advocacy role. The other has been the negative fallout from the Colombo CHOGM and the ambiguity of the Commonwealth's role, especially in human rights in Sri Lanka. This has generated significant cynicism and criticism toward Commonwealth leaders and the Secretariat from civil society and from the media.

On the positive side, two developments augur well for the future

viability of our own Society. A generous bequest from former president, Mrs Phyllis Montgomerie, will enable the Society to move into new and optimistic activities in 2014. In addition to ensuring our financial viability, we will be setting up an annual award for Commonwealth-related education projects, mainly among young people.

Another is the launch of the *Friends of the Commonwealth in Canberra*, designed to draw together the activities of the three Commonwealth bodies operating in in Canberra. A website will be launched in March 2014.

I am greatly indebted to those who have stood beside me, especially Council members and long-standing RCS supporters. I wish the RCS (ACT) every success into the future.

Hugh Craft

AGM ELECTS NEW RCS PRESIDENT FOR 2014

The Annual General Meeting of the Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Branch elected Mr Kanti Jinna to serve as President for the coming year. The outgoing President, Hugh Craft, was elected Vice-President. Mr Kevin Squair was re-elected Treasurer. The following Councillors were elected in 2013 for a three-year term: Mrs Maureen Hickman, Mr Richard Hickman, Mr Darrell Hills, Dr Elmo Jacob, Mr Colin Milner, Mr Raj Pratap and Mrs Ann Sutton. After the meeting, Richard Hickman was re-appointed as Secretary. Only the positions of President, Vice-President and Treasurer come up for election each year. The Secretary is appointed.



The new President of the RCS ACT Branch, Kanti Jinna, with his wife, Mrs Jyoti Jinna, Mrs Lynne Craft, and outgoing President, Hugh Craft. Mr Jinna previously served as Vice-President.

Leaders once more commit ‘to respect, protect and promote’ core values of the Commonwealth Charter

A communiqué issued by the Commonwealth *Heads of Government at the close of their meeting in Colombo in November 2013 reiterated their countries’ commitment to the core values set out in the Commonwealth Charter that had been agreed by all member nations.

The fundamental values, principles and aspirations of the people of the Commonwealth are based on previous CHOGM declarations and are embodied in the 2012 Charter.

In the area of Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights, the Heads noted the ‘abiding requirement for all Commonwealth citizens to be able to participate in democratic processes and to hold their governments to account, in order to shape the communities in which they live’. They also reaffirmed their belief in the rule of law ‘as an essential element for the protection of the people of the Commonwealth and as an assurance of accountable government, noting the importance of the separation of powers to maintain the integrity of the legislature, executive and judiciary’.

They similarly reaffirmed their commitment to equality and respect for the protection and promotion of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, urging members to ratify all major human rights instruments and to support the establishment and strengthening of national and/or regional human rights institutions.

Heads also reaffirmed their commitment to peaceful, open dialogue and the free flow of information, including through a free and responsible media.

Agreement was made on continuing to address the issue of child, early and forced marriage, ‘giving due consideration to the domestic legislation of members countries’.

Other subjects on which a consensus was reached included terrorism, piracy, cybercrime, the proliferation of trade in small arms and weapons, sexual violence in armed conflict—which it denounced as dehumanising and cowardly—biological diversity, development (including climate change), sustainable land management, wildlife

resources, international trade and investment, the G20, governance and the management of the oceans, gender equality, health (and the importance of access to affordable medicine), education, youth, social development, and corruption.

On the subject of Small States, Heads noted how these were disproportionately affected by the global economic crisis and have been slow to recover, with high debt burdens posing ‘a severe threat to their growth’.

Heads also expressed ‘unwavering solidarity’ with the people of Fiji and the expectation that Fiji would be reinstated as a full member of the Commonwealth. (Elections are to be held in 2014). Full support was also given to efforts by the UN towards a ‘State of Cyprus’ with a single citizenship and a single sovereignty.

It was agreed that the following countries be appointed to Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group for the next two years: Cyprus, Guyana, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka (as *ex-officio* Chair in Office) and Tanzania.

The Prince of Wales represented the Queen at the Colombo 2013 CHOGM. This is the first Heads of Government Meeting that the Queen has not attended.

The 2015 CHOGM will be in Malta. Vanuatu has offered to host the 2017 meeting.

** ‘Heads’ of Government is used in this report to include leaders or their representatives—ministers or officials. Of the 50 Commonwealth countries at the meeting, only 27 were represented by their Head of Government or State. The Canadian Prime Minister refused to attend while allegations of war crimes by Sri Lanka during the recent civil war, as well as continuing human rights abuses, remain unresolved.*

News in Brief...

RCS London has had its Royal Charter amended to reflect its new status, that is, as a society without a Club house, and as a charity that relies solely on donations and partnerships to enable it carry out its charitable purposes. The RCS had occupied the premises on Northumberland Avenue for almost 100 years and operated the Commonwealth Club from those premises. It now relies largely on its website www.thercs.org to keep in touch with members and branches.

The Commonwealth Oral History Project, an initiative of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, is to conduct 60 major interviews with leading figures on the history of the Commonwealth since 1965 when the post-colonial era saw newly independent states from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean swell the ranks of the ‘old’ Commonwealth, decisively altering its character. Dr Sue Onslow, from the Institute, will conduct a Witness Seminar on *The Heartbeat of a Modern Commonwealth? The Commonwealth Secretariat 1965-2013* in Canberra at 6pm on Wednesday 26 March at the Australian Institute of International Affairs in Deakin, sponsored jointly by the Institute and the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia.

Diversity within Commonwealth a threat to its future

The very diversity of the Commonwealth and its peoples, long touted as its strength, is at the heart of the present troubles which threaten its future.

According to Sir Ronald Sanders, a member of the Eminent Persons Group which reported to the 2011 CHOGM in Perth on Commonwealth reform, 'different perceptions about the comparative importance of democracy and development now dominate the unspoken agenda of the Commonwealth'. They were the reason, he said, why discussions were 'acrimonious' and 'prolonged' at meetings of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors in 2013 to formulate a Strategic Plan, leading to delays in the Secretariat's Budget, 'halting programs, putting jobs in jeopardy and draining staff morale'.

Speaking to the Bristol Commonwealth Society in October 2013 on the 100th Anniversary of its Charter, Sir Ronald referred to the view of some developing states that human rights are 'Western exports', a claim which he said was 'implicit' in the Sri Lankan President's statement to the UN General Assembly in September 2013 when defending his country's actions during and since the recent civil war.

But, he said, human rights are not a Western concept—they are 'ancient quests of all mankind' and the reason why Caribbean slaves revolted against their exploiters and abusers.

Referring to 'a resiling' by some Commonwealth countries from the values they have declared they support, and their accusations that those who uphold those values 'have a sinister purpose' Sir Ronald said this issue requires urgent attention by governments 'at the highest levels' if the association is to remain cohesive and effective.

Essentially, he said, the Commonwealth is a Club—a Club with rules. Membership is voluntary and Governments can withdraw at any time. But to get into it, and remain

part of it, members are expected to conduct themselves 'according to the rules which are embodied in the many declarations ... setting out the values and principles for which their countries stand'.

When governments sign-up for membership of the Commonwealth, he said, they sign up for all of these values, not only the ones that suit them from time to time. Taken collectively, it is these values that define the Commonwealth, and adhering and committing to them is what distinguishes it, that give it relevance and influence in the international community.

But the diversity that threatens to divide it will remain a weakness unless it can be 'harnessed and harmonised'. This task, he says, begins with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the criteria for whose work should be the Commonwealth Charter 'and all the values and principles that it embraces', even if it means that some leaders withdraw from the Commonwealth because its values 'restrain policies of discrimination and victimisation'.

In fact, Sir Ronald believes that the Commonwealth is stronger for the withdrawal of The Gambia in 2013 because its president wished to behead homosexuals. It was stronger for the withdrawal of

South Africa in 1961 'so it could pursue its racist policies' and stronger, again, when Zimbabwe was suspended for seriously flawed elections and organised violence against non-Mugabe supporters.

'No other association of countries brings together government and non-government organisations from every continent in the world that have a voice in almost every regional and multilateral grouping in the world, including the G7, the G20, NATO, the OECD, the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group, the Organisation of American States, the African Union and the Association of South East Asian Nations,' he said.

He believes that current problems have arisen because of a loss of confidence and trust between governments themselves and between governments and the Secretariat. That is why urgent attention must be given at the highest levels to the disharmony that has developed over adherence to the values for which the Commonwealth says it stands.

Sir Ronald Saunders, a former Caribbean diplomat, is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. He has a particular interest in Small States.

The theme of this talk was repeated in November 2013 at an Institute conference on The Commonwealth in Crisis.

Australia named for human rights abuses

Australia has been named among 13 Commonwealth countries for abuses of human rights. In its Annual Report published in January 2014 by Human Rights Watch, successive Australian governments are said to have damaged the country's record by persistently 'undercutting refugee protections'. By November 2013, Australia had returned 1191 Sri Lankans on the basis of 'cursory interviews'. The report also said that Australia has been increasingly unwilling to publicly raise human rights abuses in countries with which it has strong trade or security ties, validating the stance of those 'who mistakenly view raising human rights as an act of diplomatic aggression rather than a normal part of principled diplomacy...'

Other Commonwealth countries named in the report are Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa. A range of abuses includes corruption by officials, restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and expression, on civil society organisations and the press, the marginalisation of minority groups, failure to act against police/military violence and torture against civilians, including extra-judicial killings, rape and 'disappearances'.



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Dates for your Diary

CRICKET MATCH

The Commonwealth v. Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade

Sunday 23 February 2014 at 12 noon

Reid Oval

(cnr. Limestone Avenue and Anzac Parade)

Bring a picnic and come to the revived cricket match between teams drawn from Commonwealth diplomatic missions in Canberra and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The 20/20 limited over match was at one time a fixture on the local calendar. As seating in the small pavilion is likely to be fully occupied by players and officials, spectators are advised to provide their own chairs/rugs.

COMMONWEALTH WEEK CELEBRATIONS 2014

Multi-Faith Celebration Monday 10 March 2014 at 11.00am

Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

15 Blackall Street Barton

The annual Multi-Faith Celebration to mark Commonwealth Day will feature local leaders of world religions giving readings and a number of cultural groups will provide a program of music and dance. All RCS members are warmly invited to attend. Refreshments will be available after the service.

and

Commonwealth Dinner Thursday 13 March at 7 for 7.30

Common Room, University House ANU

Guest Speaker: Dr Hugh Craft

Is the Commonwealth in Crisis?

See Website for further details