



S76/98

## PRIME MINISTER

COMMONWEALTH SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING  
26 MAY 1976

I am glad to have this opportunity to welcome you to Canberra and to formally open your Meeting. This is the first "Commonwealth of Nations" Meeting I have attended as Prime Minister. I would like therefore, to take this opportunity of stating Australia's attitude towards the Commonwealth.

In the early months of office, the Government in Australia has been very much occupied with events in our own part of the world, and by our own domestic economic problems. This meeting now provides a welcome opportunity to emphasise Australia's continued support for the Commonwealth of Nations. I am a firm believer in the concept of today's Commonwealth, and my Government will continue to cooperate wholeheartedly in Commonwealth activities.

I am very pleased that Australia is providing the location for this meeting. This is the first time that the Commonwealth has gathered at this level, in these numbers, in the Southern Hemisphere, even though one third of the Commonwealth's members come from this side of the world. The Commonwealth has now become a substantive international organisation. It is no longer a mere "ghost of Empire".

It is a voluntary association of independent countries who continue to belong to the Commonwealth - not out of sentimentality - but for sound practical reasons. In a world where there is a growing tendency for nations to be more and more involved in the affairs of their own region, the Commonwealth provides a useful and valuable bridge between regions.

The growing regional involvement of members if anything, has increased the value of discussions in Commonwealth forums by broadening the perspective of members on world issues. In our own region, Australia is developing a broader set of relations with the nations of the Pacific and South East Asia.

Other Commonwealth countries are likewise developing closer links with their regional neighbours. Britain herself has, of course, become more closely involved in the affairs of Europe through her membership of the European economic community. Before Britain joined the Common Market she claimed her entry would be a great advantage to the Commonwealth: a Britain revitalised and strengthened by participating in the Common Market would be able to play a more influential and constructive role in world affairs.

We were heartened by the British vow to lead the European Economic Community to an outward and constructive role in world affairs, away from a conception of a narrow and selfish trading bloc. Many of the Commonwealth's member nations are exporters of primary products. Although Australia must be considered a developed nation, since our main exports are primary products, our interests in this matter lie with the under-developed world.

The European Economic Community whose trading strength in industrial products is second to none, advocates reduction of tariff barriers on manufactured goods. At the same time it raises barriers so artificial so immense against primary products in competition with theirs, that few nations can penetrate them. If the E.E.C. applied their attitudes on barriers to manufactured goods to primary products, the European nations could greatly increase their standards of living and lower their costs.

We eagerly await the plain evidence of British influence in the European Economic Community which was so emphatically promised to us as a great contribution to a better and freer world.

If this can happen, Britain's view that her membership of the E.E.C. will enable her to play a more constructive role in Commonwealth affairs will be validated. If it is not, the Commonwealth will not have been strengthened. In other ways, the changing pattern of international relations has altered and strengthened the Commonwealth.

No longer are the nations of the Commonwealth linked just through Britain. Through the Commonwealth a network of relations have developed between the independent member countries. The links which have grown up between individual Commonwealth countries have become at least as important as the longstanding links between each and Britain. The old Empire of Five is a thing of the past.

Organisations managed by, or closely associated with, the Commonwealth Secretariat, such as the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Commonwealth Foundation, and the Commonwealth Youth Program to name only three, undertake effective and expanding activities.

There are literally hundreds of "Commonwealth-based" organisations covering a broad range of activities - one of these, the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation, is to hold a major Conference in Sydney in early 1977. Many of these bodies were originally established with - and their subsequent development encouraged by - financial and other assistance from the Commonwealth.

These activities now express the importance of Commonwealth links - both Governmental and private. They are an encouraging indicator of the vitality of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is not, and never has been, a political power bloc. And it is quite inconceivable that it could ever become one. But it can help to give the small and medium sized countries a more effective voice in world affairs.

An association of small and medium sized countries from all parts of the world, many of which are also members of important regional organisations, is well placed to help in developing a stable world order that is not solely dependent on agreements between the super powers

It is not part of our conception of the world that any grouping of major powers should have predominant influence over middle and smaller countries.

We must seek relationships where smaller countries are free and able to pursue their needs, not a world which requires subservience to the largest powers.

In particular, because it makes it easy to have sympathetic and open discussion among countries of such varying levels of economic development, the Commonwealth seems to have a special role in the search for solutions to international economic problems.

This is a search which, until now, has tended to be conducted by and primarily in the interests of, the economically advanced nations.

The Commonwealth brings together rich and poor nations, developed and developing, producing and consuming, black and white, aligned and non-aligned. It is eminently suited to support constructive discussion between nations on these matters.

There is a search for a new international economic order. The means by which this order is sought will have a large impact on its ultimate form.

The Commonwealth has, in the past, served as a catalyst in important international developments, most notably the establishment of the Colombo Plan Scheme in 1950.

This scheme was subsequently widened to cover the bulk of the flow of official development assistance to the countries of Asia.

More recently the Commonwealth has played an important part in focussing attention and achieving action on southern African issues.

It was also sought to contribute to solving the Cyprus dispute

I believe it can also make a valuable contribution towards achieving a more equitable economic order.

The present meeting of senior officials is the most important Commonwealth meeting at sub-ministerial level.

These biennial meetings - which commenced in 1972 - provide an important regular way of consulting between heads of government meetings.

This meeting will be considering, among other things, the past and future programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat which continues to serve the Commonwealth well under a distinguished new Secretary General.

The Secretariat has played a vital part in a decade of evolution and change for the Commonwealth.

I welcome the consolidation which is now taking place at the Secretariat under the leadership of the new Secretary-General.

I read with interest his memorandum to the review committee, and especially endorse the sentiment of his following comments:-

"As the Secretariat is the servant of all Commonwealth Governments, I must emphasise that its work programme and priorities are incapable of being developed autonomously. They must necessarily be flexible and responsive to the wishes of member Governments..."

This meeting will be giving attention to a number of major world problems. It will consider how the nations of the Commonwealth acting separately and together can help to solve or ameliorate them.

I am delighted to be able to welcome Papua-New Guinea to these discussions. This is Papua-New Guinea's first attendance at a major Commonwealth meeting.

I am sure we all look forward to their continuing contribution to Commonwealth meetings.

This meeting will also be concerned to give some preliminary attention to arrangements for the next meeting of Commonwealth heads of Government

These heads of Governments meeting have been aptly described as the hub of Commonwealth cooperation.

I am looking forward personally to taking part in the 1977 meeting in London.

I would be grateful if you would inform the heads of Government whom you advise and represent that I look forward especially to establishing a cooperative relationship with them at next year's meeting.

Throughout its history the Commonwealth has had the capacity to respond and change to new demands - new needs.

It has now attained a new maturity.

The diversity among the members of the Commonwealth is a source of strength, encouraging a broad understanding and tolerance of each other's problems.

For nations to talk constructively with one another, and to co-operate in the solution of shared problems, an attitude of consultation and a reasoned approach to issues is essential.

One of the strengths of the Commonwealth is that it encourages such an attitude.

The Commonwealth may well become an increasingly worthwhile instrument for helping to attack the grave problems of poverty, disease, injustice and racial conflict which no one Government no one country can hope to solve on its own.