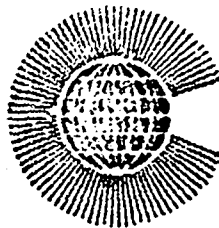


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Commonwealth Heads of Government
Regional Meeting

Australia 1978

Address by the Prime Minister of Australia,
the Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser, C.H., M.P.

At the Hilton Hotel, Sydney, Monday 13 February,
on the Occasion of the Opening of the
Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting

OPENING SPEECH

In opening this Conference, I am very pleased to join the Governor-General in welcoming you and wishing you an enjoyable and rewarding visit to Australia.

This meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government from the Asian and South Pacific Region is a notable event. It is not only the first such regional meeting in the history of the Commonwealth but it is also the largest meeting of Heads of Government yet held in Australia.

You will recall that the proposal for this meeting was initiated in London last year. All of us, I'm sure are gratified that the suggestion has been taken up so quickly.

No one who knows the Commonwealth should be surprised that we have taken this step. For one of the Commonwealth's outstanding attributes has been its resilience - its capacity to adapt and to change.

The Commonwealth has been able to grow dramatically in number, size and regional representation. In 1946 there were five member nations, today there are thirty six.

Some people expressed misgivings about enlarging the Commonwealth beyond the narrow group of five. How wrong they were. In today's world, the original group of five could never have hoped to be as relevant or constructive as the thirty six members of the contemporary Commonwealth.

Once the Commonwealth was held together by the similarity of its members - now diversity is the key.

Never before have our members been so dispersed over so many corners of the earth, represented such a wide cross section of social and economic development, participated in so many international agencies. When change of this magnitude takes place it creates the impetus for further development.

In taking this initiative we are responding to the compelling commonsense of two facts -

- We are all members of the Commonwealth and value highly the opportunities the Commonwealth tie gives us to discuss vital issues with one another.
- We are also neighbours in the Asia-South Pacific Region.

It is natural that the 12 of us, joined by ties of history and geography, should come together to develop and strengthen the Commonwealth relationship and foster regional co-operation within the Commonwealth framework.

Over the years the Commonwealth has evolved a distinctive style which emphasises candid exchanges of views among friends of equal standing, reconciling differences and building on common ground. How much better if all international relations were conducted in this way.

This approach has ensured not just the Commonwealth's survival but a strength and vitality to confront the great challenges of the World.

This meeting provides the Commonwealth members of this region with our first opportunity to use the unique Commonwealth model to adapt ourselves to new circumstances and co-operate more effectively with one another. This is becoming all the more pressing as each year shows more clearly that distance is being eaten away and isolation is coming to an end.

We are being drawn together with remarkable speed, and, as Heads of Government responsible for the welfare of our people, we know we cannot ignore the implications of our evergrowing interdependence.

We know that there is hardly anything that one of us can do for our own economy or security that will not concern another. We recognise that none can diminish the dignity of one man without diminishing the dignity of all others.

None of us can be visited by calamity, whether due to nature or the misjudgement of men without it affecting the welfare of others. Nor can any nation improve its position without it holding out hope for other nations.

The reality of our changing world imposes greater obligations on each of us. Our very presence here is evidence of our commitment to explore every possible way of acting together, whether novel or not.

The items that fill the agenda of our present world are well known to all of us. Poverty, famine, unemployment, inflation, energy shortage, trade barriers, growing national indebtedness, racism and the persistence of international conflict.

The impact of these problems has varied greatly because our nations vary in size, in numbers, in resources. But none of us has been spared all their effects.

We know we cannot resolve these problems at one meeting. They are immensely difficult issues that engage in a most profound way the ingenuity and goodwill of us all. But our common concerns, our common hopes, and the fact that we live in a common regional neighbourhood, leads us to continue our search for solutions in this new forum.

Clearly we must confront the central issue of the gap between richer and poorer nations and respond meaningfully to the challenge of global inequities.

Australia deeply regrets that agreement has not yet been reached in the international negotiations on the establishment of a common fund to stabilise commodity prices.

A common fund and the integrated programme on commodities can make a significant contribution to stabilising international trade in primary commodities - a stabilisation at an equitable price level which is so important to the economic progress of many developing countries.

We believe developed nations have to show a sense of urgency and purpose on this issue. Australia has recently re-examined its own position on this and we hope that there will be a further evolution in the views of other developed nations.

There is indeed a great need for both developed and developing countries to reassess their stances. It would be tragic if we held dogmatically to rigid and unbending positions. I hope that our talks here will encourage others to undertake such a reassessment.

In the meeting, we will discuss our political environment, the impact of the international distribution of power in our region, the issues of industrialisation and trade. We will also address ourselves to the major problem of energy scarcity, the energy requirements of the village and the industrial metropolis.

In all this there is ample scope for useful and practical exchanges. We are agreed that we can make the best possible use of our opportunity to achieve practical results by adopting a regional focus identifying areas of special regional interest.

We seek to enhance the ability of the Commonwealth to contribute to the resolution of the problems we face, and we seek to complement other forms of association in our region of the world.

The opportunities of this conference present a great challenge to us.

What we can realistically ask of ourselves is -

- To apply all our energies to these problems;
- to explore every possible means of mutual assistance;
- and to strive for practical and workmanlike solutions.

This is precisely what the Commonwealth stands for, and this meeting is committed to this goal.

May I say once again that all Australians join with me in welcoming you here today. In addition to the Heads of Government, we also welcome the Commonwealth Secretary-General. And we, as the host Government, appreciate the contribution which the Commonwealth Secretariat has made to the arrangements for this Regional Meeting.

I now have great pleasure in formally declaring open this First Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting - and inviting the Secretary-General to address us.

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15 February 1978