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EMBARGO: 5:00 pm

## PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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### ELECTORATE TALK

In the coming week I will be attending a Commonwealth Meeting in New Delhi, which will bring together Heads of Government of 16 countries from the Asian and Pacific regions. The meeting is the second Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting, the first was held in Sydney in 1978.

The Commonwealth of Nations differs from all other international associations in that its members share not a common ideology or interest, like the non-aligned movement, nor the same geographical region, like ASEAN or the Organisation of African Unity, but a similar heritage, derived from institutions associated with the former British Empire. This historical link provides the Commonwealth with many of the features which makes it unique.

Amongst its members are to be found countries in all parts of the world, at every size and stage of economic development, with a variety of political systems and ideological beliefs and a multiplicity of languages, religions and cultures. The Commonwealth is a unique institution. But its special quality goes even beyond the exceptional features I have identified. It remains a voluntary association which operates only on the basis of consensus. There are no obligations connected with membership; no treaty or other written commitments; only a dedication to the ideals of the Commonwealth; such as those enshrined in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, adopted by Heads of Government in Singapore in 1971.

There, the Commonwealth members expressed the belief that international peace and order were essential to the security of mankind: that the liberty of the individual was sacrosanct; that racial prejudice was a dangerous sickness; that all forms of colonial domination and racial oppression were to be opposed; that the wide disparities in wealth now existing between different sections of mankind were too great to be tolerated; and, that international co-operation was essential to remove the causes of war, promote tolerance, combat injustice, and secure development amongst the peoples of the world.

A source of particular strength in the Commonwealth is its tradition of holding its discussions confidentially, and reaching decisions without voting. This enables the members to engage in full and frank exchanges of view, but at the same time to make special efforts to reconcile different points of view in solving global and regional problems.

It was in this context that the Commonwealth was instrumental in achieving a breakthrough in the political impasse over Rhodesia's future, through the Lancaster House talks last year. The independence of Zimbabwe and its admission to the Commonwealth are a great tribute to the association's role in contemporary diplomacy.

At a less publicised, but no less important level, are the Commonwealth's activities in economic and functional co-operation, which provide worthwhile and practical results to member countries.

The concept of a Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting arose from an Australian perception that the countries and interests of South East Asia and particularly the Pacific Ocean regions were not receiving the attention they merited at regular Heads of Government Meetings because of the Commonwealth's size and pre-occupation with other world-wide issues.

The Government accordingly decided that, to bring greater Commonwealth focus to bear on the areas of Australia's north west and east, all Commonwealth countries in the Asian/Pacific region would be invited to a meeting in Sydney in February 1978. This meeting demonstrated that the CHOGRM - as it has come to be called - concept had responded to a genuinely felt need by the participants, particularly from the South Pacific, for a Commonwealth forum of greater relevance and suitability to their interests, and the agreement to hold the second meeting in New Delhi underscored the success of that Australian initiative.

The Sydney meeting was successful not only from the point of view of the expanded consultative process it has created, but also because it instituted a general pattern of both economic and political consultation and understanding which has enabled the island leaders of the South Pacific to find roles for their countries in the international community.

The flow-on from the Sydney CHOGRM has seen the creation of a network for exchanges of ideas at the official and political levels throughout the region which could not have been achieved without the institution of that meeting.

The New Delhi meeting has the capacity to promote dialogue between Heads of Government at a particularly critical time in international political and economic developments. It will bring together Heads of Government from a region which borders on the scene of some of the most serious political issues now confronting the world, in Afghanistan and South East Asia. It is also expected to give major attention to ways and means of increasing co-operation between member countries, particularly in the areas of energy, and industrial development. Australia will play its full part in these efforts.

It has already been announced that Melbourne will be the venue for the full Heads of Government Meeting late next year. This will be the most important international meeting ever held in Australia, bringing together more than 40 Heads of Government. Arrangements are already in hand for the organisation of this meeting and I am confident that it will enjoy the success that has characterised past meetings and that it will make a significant contribution to the consideration of important world issues and the furthering of Commonwealth co-operation. I would also like to add that the very fact that that meeting is being held in Australia is, in a sense, a compliment to Australia and a compliment to the role that Australia has played in a constructive way in Commonwealth and international affairs.