



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER, 1980

ADDRESS TO THE COMMONWEALTH BROADCASTING ASSOCIATION
SYDNEY

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the 13th Conference of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association. This welcome is strengthened in the knowledge that you represent an important part of the activities of an institution that Australians value very highly - the Commonwealth of Nations. May I also say how pleased I am to see here the General Manager of our own national broadcasting service - Sir Talbot Duckmanton.

Sir Talbot has been a leading figure in Australian broadcasting for many years now and I know his contribution to the development of Commonwealth broadcasting has been considerable. We welcome him back after a protracted illness.

This Conference is virtually a microcosm of the Commonwealth; drawing together people from countries of diverse economic and political systems; countries which range in population from the smallest to the biggest in the world; in geography from our nearest neighbours to some who are farthest removed from this region. Yet there are bonds between our nations which make a strength of this diversity; which enable it to serve as a framework of communication and co-operation beneficial to us all.

As an international association, the Commonwealth of Nations is unique. For it is not based on the same geographical region; like ASEAN, or the organisation of African unity. Nor is it based on a common ideology or interest, like the non-aligned movement. But members of the Commonwealth share a common history, a language and a heritage of values. And these give rise to a shared vision of the kind of world we are working together to create.

Nowhere is this vision better enshrined than in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, unanimously adopted by 31 Heads of Government in Singapore in 1971. These cover such fundamental matters as international peace and order; the liberty of the individual; racial prejudice; disparities in wealth between countries of international co-operation.

Of course, the Commonwealth could simply have gone through the motions of pursuing these principles, preserving a facade of unity by avoiding contentious issues. Indeed, for a long time, the Commonwealth had to contend with the defeatist and negative view that it did not have the potential for a continuing and constructive role in world affairs.

It is not such a long time ago that many people openly questioned the very purpose of the Commonwealth in a modern world. It was regarded as an anachronism; a relic of the British Empire, with little relevance in a world of completely changed political, economic and social realities. I think that scepticism has been firmly put to rest over the last few years.

The Commonwealth has proven itself able to adapt to change, to become a vehicle for constructive action, and exchange. Indeed, it has retained the active involvement of so many nations precisely because it has faced all the major issues head on. One need only look at the agendas and communiqués of the meetings of Heads of Government to appreciate that fact.

Of course, the most dramatic example of the potency of the Commonwealth in international affairs was given by the 1979 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka. It laid the framework for a settlement of the conflict in Zimbabwe, a settlement that had eluded the prolonged efforts of major powers.

I have recently returned from a meeting of Regional Commonwealth Heads of Government in New Delhi. There, our discussions covered key developments in this part of the world including trade and energy, and the vexing problems in Kampuchea and Afghanistan. Regional meetings of this kind are a good example of the ability of the Commonwealth to adapt to new situations.

Indeed, the concept of a regional meeting arose from an Australian perception that the special concerns and interests of South and South-East Asia, and particularly the Pacific Ocean region, could usefully be discussed in the informal and frank way that has characterised larger Commonwealth meetings. It was seen as a regional complement to what the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting does on a global scale.

Australia consulted its Asian and Pacific Commonwealth neighbours, found the idea well received, and issued invitations to a meeting in Sydney in February, 1978. This meeting demonstrated that the CHOGRM concept had indeed responded to a genuinely felt need by the participants.

The subsequent meeting in New Delhi, and the agreement to hold a third meeting in Fiji in 1982, have underscored the success of this initiative.

Of course, the next 12 months will be of particular interest to Australia as we prepare to host the 1981 Heads of Government Meeting in Melbourne. This will be the most important international meeting ever held in Australia, bringing together more than 40 Heads of Government. We are honoured to have been chosen as host for the meeting and accept this honour as a recognition of the constructive role that Australia has played in Commonwealth and international affairs.

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.

But in the longer term the strength and vitality of the Commonwealth depend on far more than the links between Heads of Government. Most importantly, they rely on the links between people at all levels. In a couple of years' time, Australia will be the proud host of the Commonwealth Games. This must surely be the biggest single event that brings Commonwealth people together, because it is an event that is shared, not only by those who participate, but also by the millions who follow it through the media. And that is something which underscores the special role played by the organisations you represent at this Conference.

For the vast majority of our populations who cannot attend conferences, Games and gatherings of this kind, the reality of the Commonwealth and its value is derived, in large part, from what you, the broadcasters, say about it. And also, from what you don't say.

As a politician, I am very aware of the importance of the media in shaping popular perceptions and creating the environment within which the politician must operate. Commonwealth Heads of Government have explicitly recognised the importance of mass communication in a number of ways.

Part of the Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice reads: "We are particularly conscious of the importance of the contribution the media can make to human rights and the eradication of racism and racial prejudice by helping to eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding between people and by drawing attention to the evils which afflict humanity. We affirm the importance of truthful presentation of facts in order to ensure that the public are fully informed of the dangers presented by racism and racialism".

Lusaka also saw two initiatives, both suggested by the Australian Government, of relevance to this Conference. The first was the establishment of a Commonwealth Committee on Communications and the Media. This Committee has been identifying the most pressing communications and media problems experienced by Commonwealth countries, especially the developing ones, and suggesting suitable forms of practical co-operation to tackle them. Its frame of reference covers some of the areas that are right in the forefront of current international discussions such as the role of the major international news agencies. The agencies have a traditional European and North American orientation which shapes the news they cover.

This creates concern, particularly among developing countries, that many of the problems and perspectives which they regard as important are not being adequately covered. It is an extremely thorny issue and we will be looking with great interest at the Committee's report to the next Heads of Government Meeting in Melbourne.

No doubt, the CBA will be one of the bodies involved in implementing any recommendations which flow from this report.

A second Lusaka initiative was the establishment of the Commonwealth media exchange scheme, and I understand that the CBA was involved in the formulation of its criteria. Moves are now underway for the first of the proposed exchanges to take place, taking Australian journalists to agencies in developing Commonwealth countries and bringing journalists from such countries here. These exchanges will heighten the sensitivity with which news is gathered and interpreted. Such sensitivity can be of inestimable value in promoting the awareness and understanding we have of one another; for the people of the media are so often our only source of knowledge of far-off places and events.

Education, information, entertainment; broadcasting is absolutely central to all of them. The organisations represented in the C.B.A. broadcast television and radio to a combined population of about 1000 million people. This gives you enormous power, but it brings with it great responsibility as to how this power is exercised. It also means that, on occasions, the accurate presentation of world events requires that men and women from your organisations live in the shadow of danger.

Only this year, a young and talented member of our own national broadcasting service lost his life. I know that these dangers are faced and accepted as part of the responsible pursuit of truth. But too often, as we benefit from the world being brought into our drawing rooms, we are unaware of the high professionalism and sense of responsibility that attend much of what goes on in bringing to us all, the news of the world.

I know that many of the topics you will be looking at at this Congress reflect your awareness of the twin concepts of power and responsibility. For example, "impartiality and fairness" in news and current affairs broadcasting; and "violence on television". These and other broadcasting issues, such as the choice of appropriate technologies, are current in Australia.

There is much for us to learn from you in these matters, and, no doubt there is much in our experience from which you will benefit. And this is essentially what the Commonwealth represents - a basis for the exchange of ideas and information; a platform for co-operation. I wish you well in your deliberations. You face a most formidable and challenging agenda; and I have no doubt that your discussions and your resolutions will contribute not only to the needs of the Commonwealth; but to those of the wider world beyond.

I am grateful for the invitation to be with you today and I have much pleasure in declaring this Conference open.