



EMBARGO: 5:00 pm

PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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ELECTORATE TALK

It is Commonwealth Day tomorrow, so it is opportune to remind all Australians of the relevance of the Commonwealth, because the Commonwealth does mean much to Australia. It is particularly significant in 1981 because the Statute of Westminster, the British Parliamentary Act which led to the Commonwealth is 50 years old, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will be held in Australia for the first time.

There is more to the Commonwealth than it being a symbol of Australia's traditional links with Britain. The Commonwealth of today has its own identity. It has a record of accomplishments of which Australians can be proud, and it continues to work towards solving international problems.

The Commonwealth is unique from other international organisations based on geographic, economic or ideological considerations. Instead, the bond between all the countries which make up the Commonwealth is their historical connection with Britain. It is a voluntary association operating only on the basis of consensus.

The Commonwealth is relevant in that it provides Australia with access to the views of 43 countries on a wide variety of topics of world importance. Australia's membership of the Commonwealth enables us to influence those views.

There are no obligations involved in membership, no treaties nor written commitments, only a dedication to the ideals of the Commonwealth.

One of the Commonwealth's major strengths is its practice of holding its discussions confidentially, and reaching decisions without voting. This enables the members to talk fully, and frankly but simultaneously making a special effort to reconcile the different points of view in trying to solve both global and regional problems.

Then there are those critics without any alternative, constructive ideas, who decry the achievements of Australia's involvement in the Commonwealth.

The Leader of the Labor Opposition, Mr. Hayden, views the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting as "an anachronistic institution, a talk-shop of dubious value to Australia". This is his description of an occasion which brings together some 44 Heads of Government, over 90% of whom represent Third World countries.

Those attending will include people of the calibre of Indira Gandhi, Pierre Trudeau, Julius Nyrere, Margaret Thatcher and Lee Kuan Yew - all of whom according to the Leader of the Opposition are prepared to travel long distances and to waste their time on a useless gathering.

What can one say about such a view? Well, first one can say that it is utterly old-fashioned. It is the sort of thing that used to be said 20 or 30 years ago, before the Commonwealth had been transformed into a multi-racial association of independent states drawn from all continents. Since then it has become an important and very contemporary instrument for dealing with North/South economic issues, African and Asian issues, as well as other matters of concern to its members.

I have no doubt that anyone meeting Mr. Ramphal, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who is known and respected in the diplomatic centre of the world, and Mr. Hayden would have any difficulty in determining who was really the anachronism in today's world. Indeed, after saying what he did, Mr. Hayden had to immediately contradict himself and acknowledge that this so-called talk-shop had achieved notable success (his words) at its very last meeting in Lusaka, where the settlement on Zimbabwe was negotiated. He did not explain how an anachronism was able to achieve this.

The only conclusion that one can draw from the Leader of the Opposition's foolish and insulting remarks about the Commonwealth is that he does not anticipate ever being in the position of representing Australia at one of its meetings. For how, after what he has said, could he ever justify his attendance?

The agreement on an effective declaration against apartheid is just one example where member nations of the Commonwealth have overcome their differences despite their varied political groupings at other forums such as the United Nations.

Australia has a very special responsibility in relation to the South Pacific, particularly since Vanuatu is the newest member of the Commonwealth. The obvious connection between South Pacific countries and us is through the Commonwealth.

Many Australians relate to the Commonwealth at another level. There are 300 non-government organisations through which Australians meet, learn and share experiences with overseas colleagues working in technical and professional fields. Australia hosted the Commonwealth Broadcasting Conference last year, and we will host the Commonwealth Press Conference this year. Appellate judges from various Commonwealth countries also met in Sydney in 1980.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Melbourne in September/October will be the most important international event ever held in Australia. This will further Commonwealth co-operation. Its flexibility and consequent worthwhile results have already been demonstrated, Australia having played a major role at the two previous Heads of Government Meetings I have attended.

Australia was deeply involved in the Commonwealth negotiations to bring about an end to the conflicts in Rhodesia and the subsequent formation of Zimbabwe. There has been progress on a common fund for commodities with a significant input from Australia.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, Australia was responsible for beginning a report on the constraints to world economic growth. Another study initiated by Australia in 1979 has laid down guidelines for international co-operation in the field of media and communications, an area much politicised in other international organisations.

Not only will the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Melbourne later this year be the most important international event ever held in Australia, but it will also be one of the most important international events of 1981. It will follow the Ottawa Summit of Western developed countries and the proposed Brandt Summit in Mexico City. Both of these meetings will discuss international economic issues, the North-South dialogue. Both will be hoping to point the way towards a stable and equitable economic system.

It is hoped this will result in a round of global negotiations at the United Nations.

The Melbourne Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will be the largest meeting of Heads of Government of developed and developing countries in 1981. It will also be able to capitalise on whatever agreements are reached at Ottawa and Mexico City. That is why the Melbourne Commonwealth meeting has a special significance.

It is not the question of Australia trying to grandstand on the world stage, but a serious attempt to bring about practical and constructive solutions to problems which should concern us all. Co-operation at such breadth and depth must prove to be useful in resolving many world issues. Such a high level involvement ensures the future development of the Commonwealth, and Australia's continued recognition of its value.