

BRONZE AWARD

The birth of the modern Commonwealth

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The birth of the modern Commonwealth, as we recognise it today, began with India and Pakistan's independence from Britain in 1947. In 1949, India's desire to become a republic and to cut constitutional ties with the British monarchy while remaining within the Commonwealth forced leaders to rethink the principles of Commonwealth membership. The London Declaration of the same year dropped the word 'British' from the association's title.

Removing the requirement that member countries have the British Monarch as their Head of State, the same Declaration recognised King George VI as the "symbol of their free association and as such Head of the Commonwealth". India was thus welcomed as the first republican member of a modern and voluntary association. So exceptional was the spirit of accommodation on all sides in reaching this agreement that the Indian Prime Minister, Jawarhalal Nehru, was moved to say at the time that the Commonwealth could bring "a touch of healing" to the management of contemporary world problems.

Committed to racial equality and national sovereignty, the Commonwealth became the natural association of choice for many new nations emerging out of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s. Ghana achieved independence in 1957 and became the first majority-ruled African member. Jamaica was the first to claim sovereignty in the Caribbean in 1962; in the same year, Samoa became the first among countries in the Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand). From this point on, the Commonwealth expanded rapidly.

In 1965, an important milestone was reached when Commonwealth leaders established the Commonwealth Secretariat at Marlborough House in London. This was to be the association's own independent civil service, headed by a Commonwealth Secretary-General. The Secretary-General is

now elected by Heads for no more than two four-year terms in office. Mr Kamallesh Sharma, an Indian diplomat, took up office as the most recent Commonwealth Secretary-General in April 2008.

He is the fifth, and follows the Canadian Arnold Smith (1965 – 1975), Sir Shridath Ramphal, from Guyana (1975 – 1990), Chief Anyaoku, from Nigeria (1990 – 2000) and New Zealander, Don McKinnon (2000 – 2008). Previously, the Commonwealth had been administered through the government of the UK, but this move made the Secretariat answerable to all member governments. It carries out consultations on their behalf, helps them with policy-making, spreading information and delivering agreed Commonwealth initiatives.

A year later, in 1966, the Commonwealth Foundation was launched to support the work of many Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs and promote Commonwealth art and culture. Two further milestones occurred in 1971. First, leaders adopted the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, which gave the association a formal code of ethics and committed members to improve human rights and seeking racial and economic justice. The leaders declared their belief in peace, liberty, human dignity and democracy.

At the same time, they declared their hatred towards racial prejudice, colonial domination and wide wealth disparities. The Heads stated: "We believe that international cooperation is essential to remove the causes of war, promote tolerance, combat injustice and secure development. We are convinced that the Commonwealth is one of the most fruitful associations for these purposes...(and that it can) provide a constructive example of the multi-national approach which is vital...(and) based on consultation, discussion and cooperation.

Secondly, they established the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. Based on mutualism, the Fund was among the first to advance the idea of technical cooperation among developing countries. In 1991, building on the principles adopted in Singapore, the Harare Declaration set the Commonwealth firmly on a new course for a new century: promoting democracy and good governance, human rights and the rule of law, and sustainable economic and social development.

As part of the Harare priorities, the Commonwealth assists countries in the transition to democracy by helping to draft legislation, review and amend electoral procedures and otherwise create the framework for democracy to take root. Between 1990 and mid-1996, the Commonwealth observed some 18 elections or referendums to further this work. At a 1995 summit in New Zealand, leaders adopted the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme to give practical expression to the Harare principles, particularly democracy, development and consensus-building.

They agreed on practical steps to address severe and persistent violations of these principles and established a mechanism – a Ministerial Action Group of Foreign Ministers – to carry this forward. In this context, in the face of human rights abuses by a military regime, they took the unprecedented step of suspending Nigeria's membership.