

*Royal Commonwealth Society of Queensland  
Christmas Dinner  
Tattersalls  
13 December 2000*

*The Hon Paul de Jersey AC, Chief Justice of Queensland*

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It is a great pleasure to be with you this evening. How quickly Christmas creeps upon us! Soon as many as twelve months will have passed since the year 2000 was heralded with those memorable fireworks. Now the year 2001 approaches – the “real” new millennium for some – rationally I hope many, and significantly for all Australians – the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of our federal nation.

The centenary of federation will be both a cause for celebration, and, I hope, a catalyst for Australians carefully to ponder future national directions. We owe much of our present reality to the former British Empire – that much is basic. And we are all keenly aware that the Queen remains our Head of State. But I wonder how well citizens of the Australian Commonwealth understand the key continuing role membership of the *Commonwealth of Nations* plays in our own lives, in the life of our nation.

You all, of course, are acutely aware of this – membership of the Society entails, in your President’s words, a devotion to “promoting an understanding of the Commonwealth of Nations and of the factors which shape the lives of its peoples and the policies of its governments.”

I imagine any popular criticism of the Commonwealth of Nations is explained by lack of understanding of its beneficial role. This is certainly true of the old charge, still

occasionally levelled, that the Commonwealth is but an “irrelevant imperial hangover”<sup>1</sup>, or as colourfully put by the BBC, “a collection of not very important states brought together by accident of having been colonised by Britain”<sup>2</sup>. So, too, criticism of the Commonwealth as a “mere talking shop”<sup>3</sup> ignores its *active* role in promoting peace and democracy.

Secretary-General the Rt Hon Don McKinnon, rejecting this sort of criticism, nonetheless points out that “talking” is itself of great importance – “War only begins when diplomacy fails. Diplomacy fails when talking stops.”<sup>4</sup>... or how did the sometimes blunt Churchill memorably put it – “to jaw-jaw is better than to war-war”?

Asked to speak this evening, my immediate feeling – as an ardent supporter of the Commonwealth, was simply to follow the sometimes powerfully brief Churchillian approach. Returning to his old school Harrow to address the boys, he stood up, said: “Never give up. Never give up. Never give up.”, and immediately sat down. But I imagine you seek a little more from me; though accepting that, I must be brief, for as Voltaire said in Discourse on Man, “the secret of being a bore ... is to tell everything.”<sup>5</sup> But let me endeavour, concisely, to remind us of a little about the Commonwealth!

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<sup>1</sup> “The Commonwealth: In the Service of a Noble Cause”, Valedictory Speech by Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku, GCVO, TC, CON. Tuesday 21 March 2000 (see The Commonwealth webpage); “British Commonwealth: Dinosaur or dynamic force?”, CNN World News Story Page, 24 October 1997, [www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/24/commonwealth.summit](http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/24/commonwealth.summit)

<sup>2</sup> “Is the Commonwealth a pointless talking shop?”, BBC News Online Network, 9 November 1999, [newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking\\_point/newsid\\_511000/511461.asp](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/talking_point/newsid_511000/511461.asp)

<sup>3</sup> *Id*

<sup>4</sup> de Silva, N. “McKinnon and the Commonwealth”, Commonwealth Feature, The Commonwealth webpage, [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/features/0009.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/features/0009.htm)

<sup>5</sup> cf Kirby J: ANU Community Aid Abroad address, 6 October 2000

Today's Commonwealth is an interestingly unique organisation. Its 54 members include developed and developing, populous and small nations, from every continent and ocean, together remarkably accounting for as many as 1.7 billion people, or 30% of the total population of the earth<sup>6</sup>. 33 are republics, 16 constitutional monarchies whose Head of State is Queen Elizabeth II, and five with monarchies of their own<sup>7</sup>.

Yet for this diversity, as well as members' varying cultures, religions, and lifestyles<sup>8</sup>, Commonwealth countries are held together by a "strong fabric"<sup>9</sup> – they share a common language, similar *modus operandii*, alike historical experience<sup>10</sup>, and in most countries, immensely significant institutions of British origin – representative democracy, an independent judiciary, the rule of law<sup>11</sup>.

In speaking of the British influence, may I recall for you, by the way, the circumstance that when visiting London in 1902, our first Prime Minister Edmund Barton had what 30,000 Australians considered to be the audacity to call on the way upon the Pope in Rome: they signed a petition in protest! It is probably a mistake to attribute all of the retreat from tradition to a fiercely independent 21<sup>st</sup> century society!

It seems Australians may always have been a questioning, if not truculent, lot!

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<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth webpage, [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/index.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/index.htm)

<sup>7</sup> The Commonwealth webpage, [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/members/index.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/members/index.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Anyaoku, Chief E. "Space in Which Hope can Grow: The Commonwealth and Preventative Diplomacy", INCORE webpage, [www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/publication/occasional/emeka.html](http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/publication/occasional/emeka.html)

<sup>9</sup> McKinnon, Rt Hon D. "The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision", Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999 (see [www.nzhcottawa.org/publications/commonwealth\\_day\\_speech.htm](http://www.nzhcottawa.org/publications/commonwealth_day_speech.htm))

<sup>10</sup> History of the Commonwealth, The Commonwealth webpage, see [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm), and pages following

The features which now make the Commonwealth unique, are also its greatest strengths – the equality of member nations, large or small, not evident in any other such organisation<sup>12</sup>; the quiet and effective way it operates “behind the scenes”<sup>13</sup>, the informal, non-government networks of professional associations and individuals which strengthen its existence as a “global sub-system”<sup>14</sup>. Its effectiveness is well illustrated by the “queue” of countries seeking membership<sup>15</sup>, and attested by government officials who speak of a warmth and understanding among its representatives not found elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Over the 51 years following the 1949 London Declaration, which founded our modern Commonwealth, it has fashioned itself a number of roles in serving the needs of its members. Most recently, the Commonwealth has undertaken actively to promote its common values as reaffirmed by the 1991 Harare Declaration – democracy, the rule of law, human rights and sustainable development<sup>17</sup>. It provides assistance to

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<sup>11</sup> McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>12</sup> de Silva, N. “McKinnon and the Commonwealth”, Commonwealth Feature, The Commonwealth webpage

<sup>13</sup> Opening Address by Commonwealth Secretary-General Rt Hon Don McKinnon at the Fourth Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 24 May 2000, see [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/speeches/006-1.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/speeches/006-1.htm); House of Commons Hansard Debates for 31 March 1994, per the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr M Lennox-Boyd)

<sup>14</sup> Anyaoku, Chief E. “Space in Which Hope can Grow: The Commonwealth and Preventative Diplomacy”, INCORE webpage; McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>15</sup> McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999; “British Commonwealth: Dinosaur or dynamic force?”, CNN World News Story Page, 24 October 1997

<sup>16</sup> House of Commons Hansard Debates for 31 March 1994, per Mr CD Townsend (Bexleyheath); McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>17</sup> History of the Commonwealth, The Commonwealth webpage, see [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm), and pages following

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countries undergoing the shift to democracy – helping draft legislation, helping build a democratic framework, and of particular value, dare I now say, monitoring electoral processes<sup>18</sup>. The ‘Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group’ established in 1995 “gave teeth to Harare”<sup>19</sup>: it monitors States who violate requisite standards. It does so in a measured way, however, conscious of the significance of nations judging other nations.<sup>20</sup> The Group acts promptly, as was seen in October 1999, where the suspension of Pakistan from Commonwealth councils was the only response by an international organisation to the military coup.<sup>21</sup>

I sense there is a commendable openness about the workings of the Commonwealth. The fear that even apparently straightforward things may these days obscure nasty hidden agendas permeates so much modern behaviour! I am reminded of Talleyrand and Metternich who, as respective foreign ministers, negotiated for seemingly endless decades to secure resolution to the apparently interminable wars between Germany and France. The matter left unresolved, Metternich suddenly died, drawing Talleyrand’s query: “Now why did he do that?” But there is no hidden agenda in the Commonwealth!

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<sup>18</sup> *id*, Valedictory Speech by Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku, GCVO, TC, CON. Tuesday 21 March 2000; Anyaoku, Chief E. “Space in Which Hope can Grow: The Commonwealth and Preventative Diplomacy”, INCORE webpage; House of Commons Hansard Debates for 31 March 1994, per Mr CD Townsend (Bexleyheath)

<sup>19</sup> Valedictory Speech by Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku, GCVO, TC, CON. Tuesday 21 March 2000

<sup>20</sup> McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>21</sup> Opening Address by Commonwealth Secretary-General Rt Hon Don McKinnon at the Fourth Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 24 May 2000

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The Commonwealth commendably seeks to serve also the particular needs of the small states, states which aggregate to two-thirds of its membership.<sup>22</sup> For example, a Joint Task Force has been established with the World Bank to address their needs<sup>23</sup>, with a Joint Commonwealth Office in New York to facilitate their missions to the United Nations<sup>24</sup>.

These are, of course, but a few of the very many ways the Commonwealth seeks to meet members' needs. Like all organisations, it faces challenges as it enters the new millennium. It must consider, is considering, enhancing organisational effectiveness, and how beneficially to streamline the approaches of bodies like the CMAG.<sup>25</sup>

But perhaps the greatest challenge is sufficiently to inform, and thus inspire, the youth of the Commonwealth, so that they may carry a belief in its fundamental worth well into the future: for it to remain relevant for those who follow. Of this imperative, the Commonwealth and your own Society are keenly aware.<sup>26</sup> The Commonwealth has worked hard so to inform its youth, as well as encouraging their direct involvement in

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<sup>22</sup> McKinnon, Rt Hon D. "The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision", Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>23</sup> Valedictory Speech by Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku, GCVO, TC, CON. Tuesday 21 March 2000

<sup>24</sup> History of the Commonwealth, The Commonwealth webpage, see [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/commonwealth/about/history/index.htm), and pages following

<sup>25</sup> "New powers urged for Commonwealth", BBC News Online: World, 9 November 1999, [newsvote.bbc.co.uk/low/english/world/newsid\\_510000/510419.stm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/low/english/world/newsid_510000/510419.stm), "Commonwealth countries face 'freedom test'", BBC News Online: UK Politics, 8 November 1999, [newsvote.bbc.co.uk/low/english/uk\\_politics/newsid\\_509000/509351.stm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/low/english/uk_politics/newsid_509000/509351.stm); McKinnon, Rt Hon D. "The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision", Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>26</sup> see [www.fco.gov.uk/news/keythemepage.asp?133](http://www.fco.gov.uk/news/keythemepage.asp?133) and Commonwealth Day website – [www.commonwealthday.com](http://www.commonwealthday.com), de Silva, N. "McKinnon and the Commonwealth", Commonwealth Feature, The Commonwealth webpage; Royal Commonwealth Society webpage, [www.rcsint.org/rcs\\_info.cfm](http://www.rcsint.org/rcs_info.cfm)

programs designed to meet their own particular needs.<sup>27</sup> Widespread student participation in the Commonwealth Day celebrations your Society organises, also enhances awareness and appreciation.

In her Commonwealth Day Message for the year 2000, Her Majesty spoke of the challenge brought by technological advance, but reminded us all that ultimately “what matters most is what we say to each other.”<sup>28</sup> I would respectfully add, in this context, that the subject matter remain appropriately serious. As the Commonwealth continues adapting to the social and economic realities of its member States, it must uphold, as its core focus, the indisputably pivotal principles for which it stands, and it is those which must engage the debate. This organisation, which has so benefited its members to date, can potentially do tremendous good into the future – for its members, for the world!

May I warmly commend the Royal Commonwealth Society for seeking to increase understanding of this international “network” – a network of such patent worth to mankind!

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and a very merry Christmas to you all!

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<sup>27</sup> “Secretary-General urges officials to focus on youth, democracy and the future”, Commonwealth News Release, 20 October 2000, [www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/press/0092.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/info/press/0092.htm); Opening Address by Commonwealth Secretary-General Rt Hon Don McKinnon at the Fourth Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 24 May 2000; McKinnon, Rt Hon D. “The Commonwealth at 50: Shared Values; Shared Vision”, Commonwealth Day address, 8 March 1999

<sup>28</sup> Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Commonwealth Day Message, 13 March 2000, [www.commonwealthday.com/message.cfm](http://www.commonwealthday.com/message.cfm)