

CROSSOVER



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The member states still look to Britain as the centre of the Commonwealth. Their leaders know they can get a more sympathetic hearing to their problems in London than anywhere else in the world. This is helped by the diplomats from the Commonwealth having a special relationship. The High Commissioners in London, for example, can meet any British Cabinet Minister or his Department without having to use the normal diplomatic procedure which is required of other states.

The Commonwealth Secretariat (which was created in 1965) with its Secretary-General has its offices in London. One of its main tasks is to arrange the Commonwealth Conferences. These are meetings of Prime Ministers at least every two years in one of the members' countries. Such meetings are quite informal, held in secret, with no set agenda, so leaders can feel free to discuss major issues in a friendly and relaxed manner.

The Commonwealth is an association, not just of states, but of peoples. So beneath the diplomatic level there is a network of unofficial organizations, pro-

fessional associations, and voluntary societies. There are scores of such organizations representing doctors, nurses, architects and town planners, teachers, engineers, and the press, to name just a few. Exchange programmes are arranged, and scholarships made available for those who wish to study abroad.

The Commonwealth Institute in London is the permanent home for exhibitions which show the culture and life in member states.

The Commonwealth Games which are held in various member countries bring athletes together in a great pageant of sport which does not seek to compete with the Olympic Games.

Though no country or city is the centre, all members recognize the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth. Some still acknowledge the Queen as the Head of their state. The Queen and other members of the Royal Family, by their frequent visits, help to keep the Commonwealth alive as a voluntary association of free peoples. The Christmas Message is broadcast to all members of the Commonwealth.

E. Morris

Notes

8 High Commissioners [kə'mɪ'nəz] name given to Commonwealth ambassadors in Commonwealth countries **14 Commonwealth Secretariat** organization which looks after the Commonwealth's administration **22 set fixed** **30 scores** twenties, here: plenty **43 pageant** ['pædʒənt] colourful show **49 acknowledge** accept **54 Christmas Message** talk given by the Queen and broadcast on Christmas Day

Comprehension questions

- 1 Describe the Commonwealth in terms of area and population.
- 2 What special diplomatic rights do Commonwealth representatives have in London?
- 3 In what sort of way is the Commonwealth an association of people as well as states?
- 4 What is the role of the Royal Family in the Commonwealth?

2 What use is the Commonwealth?

As Britain becomes more a part of Europe and forgets its imperial past, many ask whether the Commonwealth serves any useful purpose any more. In 1981 Malcolm Fraser, the Australian Prime Minister and chairman of the Commonwealth Conference held in Melbourne that year, said, 'If the Commonwealth is to survive, it has no choice but to engage the big issues of our time.' Perhaps this is one of the main uses of the Commonwealth today: it is a useful 'talking shop' for a large number of nations, large and small, rich and poor, that still have important cultural ties. As such it is a focus of broad influence that can examine various world issues: members were, for example, important contributors to the 1980 Brandt Report on the North-South Divide.

Here, Owen Harries, a senior adviser to the Australian Prime Minister, describes his experience of the Commonwealth as a working organization.

● **Tasks:** Is the writer positive, negative or neutral about the Commonwealth? What aspect of its work does he describe?

To many outsiders the Commonwealth seems insubstantial and vague, a kind of ghostly afterimage of the British Empire. Indeed, this view is not unknown in Commonwealth countries.

In fact, the Commonwealth is one of the few modern international organizations that functions well. Its strength lies largely in the success with which it has avoided such traps as grandiose utopianism, financial extravagance and bureaucratic elephantiasis. It depends on persuasion and discussion, not polemic and the bloc vote. While it will not alter the world fundamentally, it makes it a somewhat more civil and reasonable place at a time when these qualities are in short supply.

In other international forums – notably the United Nations – members of the Commonwealth are on both sides of the fence in most debates. In short, it has none of the essential characteristics of the old Empire.

But it would be foolish to dismiss it because of that. Hardheaded, unsentimental leaders do not give up a week of their time to travel halfway across the world for something they consider inconsequential. Why do they find it so congenial and useful?

The Commonwealth cuts across regional and ideological divisions, bringing together a very mixed bunch of ex-colonies and ex-colonizers, of minute island states and huge realms like India, Canada and Nigeria. Thus, the Commonwealth generates pressures that modify member countries' commitments to other groups, reducing the emotional temperature of disputes and making politicians more accommodating.

Having attended three Commonwealth Conferences I can testify that their deliberations are singularly free of the stultifying and bitter bloc politics that characterize the United Nations. I had a vivid personal experience that underlines the point. In 1982 I attended a conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – on nothing less than 'world culture' – in Mexico City. When I finished, I went directly to a meeting in London of the Commonwealth's 'Group of Experts' on relations between developed and underdeveloped countries. The contrast between the two experiences was as night is to day.

The UNESCO conference, which lasted nearly two weeks, was extravagant and pretentious: hundreds of delegates, a huge