

Commonwealth News

WINTER 2014

Newsletter of the Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Inc.

Patron: HE General the Hon. Sir Peter Cosgrove, AK, MC (Retd) Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

FROM THE PRESIDENT . . .

The autumn quarter was a busy one for the Society and the winter and spring quarters promise to be the same. The acceptance by His Excellency The Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove as Patron of our RCS Branch, followed by his attendance with Lady Cosgrove at the Queen's Birthday Dinner, was a highlight of this term. Our Branch held yet another successful Schools Public Speaking Competition.

Dr Hugh Craft has convened several meetings of the Phyllis Montgomerie Award project and we thank Dr Elmo Jacob for agreeing to Chair the Award

Selection Panel together with members Dr Natalie Mobini, Dr John Sutton, and Ms Pera Wells.

In the next two months Fiji will decide its future in national elections. As I write this message from the town of Ba in Fiji, it is clear that the people of Fiji have very similar concerns to those felt by Australians at last September's general elections — concerns about the cost of living and unemployment. But there is also widespread feeling that whoever wins the elections, despite promises by every party, the economy will not improve and unemployment is bound to increase.

What is different in this election is that it will be held under a new Constitution with a common franchise, a single constituency, fewer seats in Parliament and a change from voting for candidates of your own race (*see story page 3*). The voting age has also been brought down to 17 years.

Having served as an electoral officer in Fiji some years ago, I believe the electoral process has been considerably simplified and the process of gathering and counting votes will be less complicated.

Kanti Jinna

QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY DINNER

The Governor-General, HE General the Hon. Sir Peter Cosgrove and Lady Cosgrove were guests of honour at the RCS Queen's Birthday Dinner at the Commonwealth Club, Yarralumla, in June. The dinner, held jointly with the Australia-Britain Society, was attended by over 100 guests, including three former Official Secretaries. In his speech, the Governor-General referred to the Queen's Birthday list of Australian honours, which, he said, he had the privilege of announcing for the first time. Among them were those outstanding in medicine, science and the arts, but also those who are less well-known, but in whom 'the spirit of excellence' is also evident, remarking that 'it is often women in our communities whose actions go unrewarded'.

After dinner, the Governor-General and Lady Cosgrove moved among the tables, meeting guests informally as in the photograph (at right) with RCS Secretary Richard Hickman.

The RCS is particularly pleased that the Governor-General has consented to be our Patron, continuing a tradition by his predecessors.



GLASGOW READY FOR 2014 COMMONWEALTH GAMES

As the Queen's Baton Relay nears Glasgow on the final leg of its 288 day journey through Commonwealth countries, athletes from over 70 nations and territories are preparing to take part in the Commonwealth Games, an event that each four years unites the peoples of the Commonwealth like no other.

When the torch, carrying the Queen's Message, reaches Glasgow for the start of the Games on 23 July, it will have travelled more than 190,000 kilometers over 288 days, with 4000 baton bearers—up to 100 each day— from 100 communities far and wide. From the 14 June, it has been travelling the length and breadth of Scotland.

The games, covering 17 sports, will be held in 14 venues around the city of Glasgow. The Diving, only, will be held in Edinburgh.

The Australian contingent totaling 600 athletes and officials, led by *chef de mission* Steve Monghetti, includes 103 competitors taking part in track and field events, 29 in shooting, 11 in boxing (three of them women) 41 cyclists, 10 artistic gymnasts and a 12-man squad in Rugby Sevens. This event, in which Australia won Silver at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, will be contested by teams from 16 countries including the Cook Islands, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Wales, Uganda, and Canada.

In hockey, both men's and women's teams from Australia will be defending the titles they won four years ago. Hockey has been one of the most successful sports at the Games for Australia, men's teams winning four gold medals

and women's teams winning three gold and one bronze.

The Glasgow Games will be the largest ever in terms of athletes and officials attending—6500—and carries on a tradition that began over 100 years ago with the 'Festival of Empire'. This event, in 1911, was staged in London to commemorate the coronation of King George V. Now seen as the forerunner of today's Commonwealth Games, only 10 athletes in three teams (from Britain, Canada, and a combined team from Australia and New Zealand) took part. There were four events—athletics, boxing, swimming and wrestling—and the Festival passed almost without notice, except for the Australian swimmer, Harold Hardman, who, after winning the 100 yards freestyle, was asked if he would compete in the heavyweight boxing as well, where he picked up his second gold medal.

Then followed the 'Empire Games' conceived as an idea between countries that had competed in the 1920 Olympics. But it wasn't until 1930, with 11 competing nations, that the first Games were held in Hamilton, Canada. The first 'British Empire and Commonwealth Games' were staged in 1954 in Vancouver, Canada, with 24 nations taking part. The 'British Commonwealth Games', with 42 nations were held in 1970 in Edinburgh, and the first Commonwealth Games as we know them today were held in Edmonton, Canada in 1978 with 46 nations competing.

Although there are only 53 members of the Commonwealth, and there are 70 nations competing in 2014 Games, this number includes England, Scotland, Wales, as separate competitors, as well as those who have a kind of 'associate' membership of the Commonwealth at Games time. These include small territories that are independent, but not fully autonomous, such as the Cook Islands, Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands.

News in Brief . . .

South African Elections The Commonwealth Observer Team at the South African National and Provincial elections on 7 May 2014 found they were well-managed, transparent and largely violence-free. Attesting to the credibility of the elections in its report, the team found that 'the electoral process fully met international and regional democratic standards to which South Africa has committed itself'. The elections were the first in which the 'born frees' (i.e. those born in or after 1994) could vote, and marked the 20th anniversary of the first democratic elections in the country. The observers noted a high level of tolerance among supporters of rival parties (a record 200 were registered) and 'the technical efficiency' of the Independent Electoral Commission as well as the high level of confidence the political parties accorded it, borne out by the fact that all parties accepted the result. The elections were won by the African National Congress (ANC) with a reduced majority (249). A comparatively new party, the Democratic Alliance, increased its seats in the National Assembly to 89. The National Assembly elected Jacob Zuma President for his second and final 5-year term.

LGBT Rights in the Commonwealth India's decision in December 2013 to re-criminalise homosexuality means that 42 out of 53 Commonwealth countries now consider homosexuality as a crime. This means that it is illegal for 92 per cent of Commonwealth citizens to be gay. Describing these figures as 'shocking' the Royal Commonwealth Society in London says that LGBT rights is on their agenda this year.

The Queen's Young Leaders Exceptional young people from across the Commonwealth are to be recognised for their achievements in transforming their own lives and the lives of others under the Queen's Young Leaders program. Identification of young people who meet these criteria—and their nominations—are sought through RCS branches throughout the Commonwealth. Sixty young people will be selected each year for the next five years and will receive support and training to make their vision of a better society a reality. For further information see: www.queensyoungleaders.com

More countries should join the Commonwealth

The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, believes that any country wishing to join the Commonwealth should be encouraged to do so as long as they are willing to adhere to its principles and values.

In a Q&A exchange at Chatham House, London, in March, on 'The Evolution of Australia's Foreign Policy', Ms Bishop expressed the view that membership should not be restricted to those 'who were once part of the great British Empire' but also open to countries that want to be part of an organisation committed to the values laid down in the Commonwealth Charter encompassing freedoms, the rule of law and democratic institutions.

The core criteria for Commonwealth membership were set out in the final communiqué at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Uganda in 2007. As well as requiring applicants to accept and comply with the fundamental values, principles and priorities of the Commonwealth and commitment to democratic processes, this states:

(a) an applicant country, should, as a general rule, have had a historic constitutional association with an existing Commonwealth member, save in exceptional circumstances; (b) in exceptional circumstances, applications should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony that won independence in 1975 after years of guerilla activity against the colonists, was admitted to the Commonwealth in 1995.

Bordered by the sea on one side and five Commonwealth countries on its land side (Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Swaziland and South Africa), Mozambique's application was considered in the context of its relationship with its neighbouring states and reflected a change in thinking at the time about the criteria for membership, which in 2007

were finally set down at the Kampala CHOGM.

The other, and most recent new member of the Commonwealth lacking an historical constitutional association, is Rwanda, which was admitted to membership at the Trinidad and Tobago CHOGM in 2009. Part of German East Africa until 1918, it was then administered (with Burundi) by Belgium as the League of Nations, later UN, trusteeship territory of Ruanda-Urundi, ruled through traditional kings. Like Mozambique, Rwanda shares borders with Commonwealth countries, in this case Tanzania and Uganda. Although lacking a 'constitutional link' it was able to demonstrate 'a substantial relationship' and so was admitted.

Burundi, which separated from Rwanda in 1959 and became independent in 1962, is currently one of two aspiring members of the Commonwealth, according to the Secretariat in London. Like Rwanda, it shares a border with Tanzania.

Burundi is one of the smallest countries in Africa and one of the poorest in the world with the lowest life satisfaction. Its post-colonial history has been marked by warfare and genocide, corruption, famine and poor access to education.

The other current aspirant for Commonwealth membership is South Sudan, which gained its independence from Sudan following a referendum in 2011. Over many years it has been marked by civil war and conflict, atrocities against women and children, and huge displacement of population with hundreds of thousands fleeing to camps in Kenya and Uganda. It is now suffering from widespread starvation due to a serious famine.

South Sudan's links to Britain are founded on the Anglo-Egyptian condominium which governed Sudan until independence in 1956.

Other countries, with somewhat firmer links with Britain, and which could qualify for membership, are Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, the Irish Republic (a member until 1931) and even the USA. Algeria and Madagascar were at one time reported to be interested.

As Julie Bishop told the gathering at Chatham House: 'We value our membership of the Commonwealth because we believe it is a unique club in terms of the diversity of its membership.' She might have added that aspiring members realise it is better to be inside a family—even if you have to observe the rules—than outside on your own.

FIJI PREPARES FOR SEPTEMBER ELECTIONS

When Fijians go to the polls on Wednesday 17 September in the first open and democratic elections since Commodore Frank Bainimarama took power in a coup on 5 December 2006, they will be voting to elect 50 men and women in a one vote, one value, system, who will represent all the people of Fiji in one constituency, in a one-chamber parliament under a new constitution which eliminates institutionalised ethnic-based voting.

The long-promised elections by the Bainimarama regime have been characterised by transparent and inclusive arrangements. Although registration is not compulsory, the electoral office has gone to considerable lengths to register as many voters as possible. This has included sending registration teams to all Australian States and Territories so that Fijian citizens resident or temporarily resident in Australia can vote, and in Fiji, 80 teams have been using vehicles donated by India to reach rural and outlying areas in the four electoral divisions as well as people who are housebound. Postal votes are also available, closing on 4 August. All Fijians aged 18 and over are eligible to vote and the day has been declared a public holiday. Fiji is currently suspended from the Commonwealth on the basis of its failure to hold credible elections since the 2006 coup.



PO BOX 182 CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608



Schools Public Speaking Competition

The RCS Annual Schools Public Speaking Competition again attracted a large number of entries from ACT schools. The topic this year was 'The Commonwealth can be seen as a team of nations that support each other even though they have very different cultures and needs. Working together as a team, the Commonwealth nations find strength in unity'. Competitors in both Junior and Senior divisions were asked to discuss this proposition. The presentations in both sections were very high, the winners being Aisling Kinsella (Junior) and Elena Woodgate (Senior). In the photograph, Elena is seen with the competition convener Mrs Ann Sutton, and the RCS Vice-President, Dr Hugh Craft.

NOTICES

RCS Winter Lunch

Sunday 17 August 2014 at 12 noon

Rama's Fiji-Indian Restaurant, Pearce
(see flyer enclosed with this newsletter)

Visit to Indian High Commission

Wednesday 24 September 2014 at 10.30

3 Moonah Place, Yarralumla

The High Commissioner for Indian, HE Biren Nanda, will host a visit for RCS members to the Indian High Commission when he will give a talk on India's new government.

Please advise Kevin Squair (Tel. 6254 1650) of your acceptance by Friday 19 September.

Vale Mrs Joan Hughes

Our deepest condolences go to the family of Mrs Joan Hughes who died on 30 April. Mrs Hughes and her husband, Major General Ronald Hughes, who died in 2003, were long-term members and staunch supporters of the RCS.

Welcome to New Members

We warmly welcome new members of the RCS ACT Mrs Raewyn Bastion, Mr Kishan Sonah and Mrs Prya Sonah. We also welcome to corporate membership of the Society the High Commissions of Kenya, Uganda, India and Sri Lanka.