

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT, 2010**

It gives me pleasure to report the steady progress of the Society in Canberra over the past year.

### **Recognising the past**

In 2009 the modern Commonwealth has celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> year and the ACT Branch of the RCS 50 years of its operations in Canberra. Despite some setbacks in recent years, owing to ageing membership and difficulties (shared with other voluntary groups) in attracting new, younger members, the RCS has been able to sustain a viable organisation with an active and relevant programme of events.

### **Remembering core objectives**

The objective of the RCS as a local, voluntary, non-governmental organisation is to support the Commonwealth as a constructive player in the international community and Australia's role as a founding and prominent member. The traditions and values shared between Commonwealth nations constantly sustain and reinvigorate bilateral and multilateral relationships in pursuit of the Commonwealth's global mandate, enunciated by leaders in 1949, of "peace, liberty and progress".

RCS activities in Canberra are based upon education, advocacy and extending the principle of Commonwealth friendship. Important elements of our work are carried out in collaboration with two other Commonwealth bodies in Canberra.

- The Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA), convened by Professor Anthony Low AO, provides a forum for contemporary international issues, especially those of importance to the Commonwealth, through occasional seminars/visiting speakers and the annual Commonwealth Lecture in Australia.
- The Commonwealth Day Celebration Committee (CDCC), chaired by Mr. Tony Eggleton AO CVO, has as its single focus celebrating the diversity of the modern Commonwealth in a multi-faith, multicultural event on Commonwealth Day (the second Monday in March), based on the annual Westminster Abbey observance.

## **2009 in retrospect**

The theme *the Commonwealth @ 60 – serving a new generation* was the basis of many of our activities in 2009. It emphasised that the association would need to harness the commitment and skills of today's youth for a future Commonwealth of ongoing usefulness to the world and of relevance to Australian society.

Support for Branch activities during the year was consistently high. Highlights include the social and learning experience provided by visits to several High Commissions for member country briefings; the annual RCS Schools' Public Speaking Competition which continues to prove popular with secondary students and their teachers; social events including the seasonal lunches for members; collaboration with the CDCC in the Commonwealth Day celebration in March which again witnessed the Commonwealth's rich diversity in the active participation of community, multicultural and religious groups in Canberra; and the several lectures/seminars/briefings of the CRTA on current international developments impacting on the Commonwealth. Regarding the latter, the CHOGM in Trinidad and Tobago (27 -29 November 2009) provided the opportunity for a pre CHOGM briefing at the ANU by a senior DFAT officer for academics, High Commissions etc., and media articles.

### *The Commonwealth Conversation*

In July 2009 the RCS in London launched a *Commonwealth Conversation* to involve as many citizens as possible in a global dialogue about the future of the association. The broad objectives were to gather opinions about what the RCS should aim to achieve, to identify the key international issues on which the Commonwealth should focus, to help inform a future relevant program for the RCS locally and internationally, and to stimulate media interest in order to raise awareness of the Commonwealth.

In Canberra, *Conversations* were conducted at various levels that incorporated RCS members, students, international affairs study groups, diplomats, public servants and media experts. Time restraints and other interruptions (e. g. student exams) limited the scope of the project and its effectiveness. However a number of specific and general points were identified, including the general lack of factual knowledge about the Commonwealth and its role, the confusion about the place of HM The Queen (and her successors) as head of the Commonwealth, the position of Australia as a possible future republic, and a recognition of the need for leadership and global action by powerful countries and international organisations. Emerging challenges include better communication (and greater use of new media technology) on the part of the Commonwealth (and its Secretariat) and a more activist role for individual leaders and countries like Australia.

### **Outlook for 2010**

The new RCS Council should draw up its key objectives and events for 2010 as a first priority. Planning should include possible initiatives in the run-up to the Perth CHOGM in 2011. Key elements of our strategies and programme, again put together to incorporate key CRTA and CDCC activities, might include:

- maintaining core RCS social and educational activities- lunches, country briefings by High Commissions, Schools speaking competition, etc.
- continuing the *Commonwealth Conversation* into 2010.
- putting more effort into RCS-sponsored Youth Competitions, viz. schools public speaking, essay and photographic : and a possible Youth CHOGM in 2011.
- inaugurating a *Commonwealth Week* in Canberra in the first week of March 2010, to include the multi-faith, multicultural Celebration on Commonwealth Day on Monday 8 March (a CDCC activity), the annual Commonwealth Lecture on a week day (a CRTA activity) and the annual Commonwealth (DAY) Dinner on Monday 15 March (an RCS activity); and associated media activities.
- seeking the greater involvement of Canberra-based High Commissioners in Commonwealth activities.
- building relations with other Commonwealth-related groups through the ACT multicultural affairs community, namely Ghana/India/Malaysian/South African societies, etc.

In terms of important issues being faced by the Commonwealth to focus on:

- a greater emphasis on activities in areas such as democracy and good governance (especially relating to Fiji, Zimbabwe and Pakistan); food security (especially in Africa); responding to disasters (as in Samoa and Tonga); climate change (especially sea level rise involving Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Maldives).
- a submission to the joint House Committee on 'Australia's Relations with Africa' (CRTA activity).

Thanks to RCS members and the Council for their support in 2009. We can look forward to a promising year for the RCS in 2010.

Hugh Craft

President

10 February 2010