

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2011

Presented to the Annual General Meeting 9 February 2012

On behalf of the Council I present this Report for 2011.

The Perth CHOGM (the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in October, of global and national significance, dominated much of our thinking and planning during the year. Australia has now hosted three CHOGMs (Melbourne 1981, Brisbane/Coolumb 2002, Perth 2011) more than any other member country, apart from the UK. This fact alone attests to the importance in foreign policy terms that successive Australian governments have ascribed to the Commonwealth association.

Because all the political and organisational details of these summits take place in Canberra, the Branch has set about taking advantage of the benefits this proximity provides: briefings by senior government officials, visits by senior Commonwealth personnel, substantive dealings with High Commissions and so on. Working within the context of the *Friends of the Commonwealth in Canberra* - with the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA) and the Commonwealth Day Celebration Committee (CDCC) - enabled us to build a sense of partnership and authority across all Commonwealth-related local activities. This yielded good results, the Branch being consulted and our advice valued on deliberations in a number of key areas, especially on the future of the Commonwealth and the 2011 Eminent Persons Group report, as well as the Parliamentary Inquiry into *Australia's Future Relations with Africa*. These activities underline the appropriateness and potential of the advocacy role performed by the Branch over recent years.

The Commonwealth-wide theme for the year was *Women as Agents of Change*. In Canberra, with the added Care Australia tag line *Strong Women, Strong Communities* placing emphasis on the role of women and girls in the Commonwealth, this theme ran through many of our activities for the year, including the Commonwealth Day Celebration and the annual Commonwealth Dinner in March. In particular, it formed the basis of our major charitable project for 2011, a rural farming project in Zimbabwe in collaboration with Care Australia and the Crawford Fund. The total value of the project in the end was above \$15,000. We thank Care Australia, the Crawford Fund and our own members for their very generous support. Again, the appropriateness and potential of the Branch's charitable role has been reinforced.

Continuing throughout 2011 was the round of regular Branch activities - social, educational and promotional, although the Schools' Public Speaking Competition had to be cancelled this year for unavoidable reasons.

In the coming year, the RCS worldwide is being presented with a number of serious challenges that are certain to impact on the way we see ourselves and how we interface with the community.

The Council, through a subcommittee, had embarked on a revision of the Constitution that would clearly enshrine our advocacy, educational and charitable roles, and to formalise our established partnerships with the CRTA and CDCC, both set up as initiatives of our RCS Branch over the past few years.

However, this streamlining project was suspended following initiatives coming out of RCS headquarters in London proposing radical change to the future operations of the RCS branches and Commonwealth civil society organisations (CSO).

These changes were set out in our Summer 2011 Newsletter and can be boiled down to three issues.

First, the gathering up of all RCS Branches and Commonwealth civil society organisations into a new Commonwealth body called *Friends of the Commonwealth Network*.

Second, the new *Friends of the Commonwealth Network* will have two types of membership: group and individual. Our RCS Branch now has to decide whether to apply for 'group' CSO membership of the *Friends* network or to remain outside it; in the latter case we would be subject to scrutiny by RCS London along the lines described in the Summer newsletter and also in the paper that accompanies your AGM documents. Individuals in Commonwealth countries can also become *Friends*.

Third, the *Friends Network* is set deliver all sorts of benefits, including online and web-based communication as well as possibilities for a wider, stronger advocacy and representational role for its members.

The proposals raise a lot of complex and knotty problems. The Council has been working through these and intends to put them on the table at the AGM for members to discuss and resolve.

We in the ACT Branch are well-placed to handle these new challenges. We have already been working under our own *Friends of the Commonwealth in Canberra* banner for several years and have seen the benefits of local collaboration with Commonwealth partners. We now have the opportunity to formalise these arrangements and to make them work really well here in Canberra. If we can do it well, we could also help the wider RCS/CSO community, especially in Australia, to become more effective in representing the modern Commonwealth of Nations.

Hugh Craft

President

8 February 2012