

THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY, ACT BRANCH.

President's Report 2008

Over the past three years the RCS in Canberra has been rebuilding and in that time has emerged from its possible closure into a fully functioning organisation once again. The aim of the Council in 2008 has been to ensure that the Society is sustainable into the future by building a core membership that is forward-looking, committed to Commonwealth values and initiatives and pursuing an interesting and informative program.

THE PAST YEAR

The Council adopted four objectives at the outset of 2008: maintaining membership levels and commitment; targeting the next generation; promoting the Commonwealth to the community; and collaborating with other Commonwealth bodies in the ACT. Membership levels have been maintained at 93 made up of 77 members (fellows) and 16 honorary life members. Support for events during the year has been consistently high, one such popular social and learning experience for members being the briefings provided on member countries by High Commissioners. The single program directed at young people, the annual RCS Schools' Public Speaking Competition, was again very successful this year, many thanks to Ann Sutton for the experience and skills she brings to this task and to Karen Rush for her sponsorship. The RCS has again engaged in a number of promotional activities, principally through collaboration with other like-minded bodies in Canberra. For example, the RCS played a central role in mounting the second Commonwealth Day multi-faith, multi-cultural celebration (CDCC) in March which involves close collaboration with community, multicultural and religious groups in Canberra. The Society was successful in obtaining an ACT Government multicultural grant to fund the Commonwealth Day celebration in 2009. A great deal of thanks is due to Tony Eggleton for his capable and energetic chairmanship of the CDCC steering committee. Similarly the Society has been involved in supporting the activities of the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA) in arrangements for their occasional lectures/seminars/ briefings and the annual Australian Commonwealth lecture, this year delivered in Perth. Again, the work of CRTA convener, Professor Anthony Low, is much appreciated. The participation of RCS members in these wider Commonwealth activities as *Friends of the Commonwealth in Canberra* has constituted an important contribution to furthering the objectives of the RCS during 2008.

THE YEAR AHEAD

In 2009 the modern Commonwealth celebrates its 60th year commemorating that in April 1969 India was admitted to the Commonwealth as an independent, autonomous republic thereby opening the way for the emergence of a new Commonwealth of Nations (no longer a British Commonwealth) and its subsequent expansion into Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Today the Commonwealth has 53 member countries – 83 if 'associated members' that participate in the Commonwealth Games are counted.

In an anniversary year it is good to remember that the RCS - which was founded in 1868 - is the oldest Commonwealth organisation in existence, its history a mirror of the evolution of the Commonwealth from Empire to modernity. It stands for and promotes the values and ideals of the Commonwealth - peace, liberty and progress - particularly multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity in the contemporary world.

In a world facing vast challenges on the political, economic and civil society fronts, the need for active, efficacious multilateral action and collaboration from global international organisations like the Commonwealth is as great as ever. The 60th anniversary theme *The Commonwealth @ 60 - serving a new generation* will be the basis of many of our activities during the year. Looking back to the past as well as forward to the future poses challenges to the Commonwealth to harness its unique capabilities. The RCS in Canberra can play its own modest role in proving the Commonwealth's ongoing relevance to modern Australian society.

I thank members of the Council and the Society for their support during 2008 and look forward to the RCS in Canberra progressing during 2009.

Hugh Craft
President

11 February 2009