

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT on 2013**

**Presented to the Annual General Meeting 12 February 2014**

It gives me pleasure to report on behalf of the Council for 2013.

In summary, I am reporting that the RCS (ACT) over the past year has remained a useful presence in Canberra in that we have progressed our modest objectives in support of wider Commonwealth values and programmes.

As has been observed in previous reports many aspects of the modern world militate against organisations like ours being successful wholly or in part - or even surviving.

Eight years ago the RCS in the ACT was on the brink of closure. At the AGM in February 2006 a motion for the dissolution of the Society was on the agenda (one of Council members still carries it in his brief case!). This situation had arisen due to diminishing support from an aging membership, flagging enthusiasm and no one coming forward to take on leadership roles.

In these desperate circumstances a small group of people stepped up and since then have worked together to ensure the survival of the RCS in Canberra. That in itself has been hard work! Not surprising - we are essentially keeping afloat an organisation with its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the effort has been made in the strong belief that Commonwealth values are contemporary, relevant and worth standing up for – indeed the more so in the present international climate.

I believe we continue to make steady progress and that the Council and Members can take pride in our continuing success.

Here are some of the features of the past year.

On the positive side, our modest programme continued with a regular series of both a social and educational activities, including dinners, lunches, and speakers.

Through continued collaboration with the CRTA (Commonwealth Round Table of Australia) and the CDCC (Commonwealth Day Celebration Committee) we have sought to further cultivate the RCS as a group that aspires to be outward looking, learning, involved with youth and, as part of modern Australia, increasingly diverse in character, like the Commonwealth itself, multicultural and multi religious.

On the **negative side** a couple of developments external to Australia have impacted on our operations in Canberra.

First was the virtual collapse of the RCS in London. Whilst the London headquarters of the RCS still exists as the focal point of its worldwide activities, it will in future operate in a severely retracted form. The RCS (established in 1848) with its impressive headquarters just off Trafalgar Square (since 1885) has been the Commonwealth's oldest and possibly most influential civil society grouping. Having to sell off its property and with the demise of the Commonwealth Club and its facilities, it represents the removal of a platform in central London and signals the end

its high profile proactive role as a strong and respected public advocate for the Commonwealth. All of this has been a serious and disappointing development with clearly adverse impacts on the RCS brand wherever it operates in the world.

However, one positive note to come out of all this has been a realisation that we are now much very much on our own, that RCS London can only be of limited help to its overseas branches while it seeks to reinvent itself in the UK. It provides us with the opportunity to sharpen our own identity and to pursue our own programme.

A second external development with negative implications for us has been the damaging fallout over the CHOGM in Sri Lanka last October. The Commonwealth's integrity as an effectual international institution and as global advocate for human rights has been brought seriously into question. Commonwealth leadership, its leaders and the work of the Secretariat, has been subject to widespread cynicism and criticism in the media and civil society. Rightly or wrongly, the Commonwealth's reputation has suffered badly making it all the more difficult for local Commonwealth organisations like ours to flourish.

Again, there is at least one positive result from this for us in Canberra. Located in the federal capital we should be placing more emphasis on providing a forum for intelligent debate and discussion on these important political issues that could determine the usefulness of the Commonwealth itself into the future.

But there are some really positive signs as we look to the future of the RCS in Canberra.

Last year the RCS was fortunate to receive a significant legacy from the estate of the late Phyllis Montgomerie OAM which will remain a vital source of income to support a long-term future for the society in Canberra.

The financial statements show that we have now a significant income earning capacity. During 2013 the Council has worked hard to devise an operational framework for the use of the bequest. A draft Operational Guidelines paper proposes that it be used for a twofold purpose in accordance with Mrs Montgomerie's wishes: to provide financial security for ongoing Branch objectives/activities; and to create a fund for a charitable purpose, particularly in terms of education and learning about the Commonwealth. This would be administered by a small sub-Group set up by and reporting to the RCS Council.

We are pleased that Dr Denis Blight AO, FRSA has agreed to Chair this Group. Denis Blight is long experienced in the management of large funding institutions and international diplomacy and will bring valuable knowledge and skills to setting up this project. He has been asked to work under the Operational Guidelines with the view to making the first Award if possible in 2014. At the same time we have asked that his Group assess the viability of the Guidelines in the light of its initial administration and to make recommendations to the Council on improvements to its operations.

One dimension of the proposals put forward is worth further consideration. The RCS has always had a small charitable dimension supporting mainly overseas Commonwealth-related projects. It is now suggested in the draft Operational

Guidelines that the Fund be opened to encourage others to contribute and to expand the Society's charitable work as a continuing investment in our future.

Another initiative of the recent past will now be launched. The *Friends of the Commonwealth in Canberra* is an umbrella concept devised to bring together and promote the activities of the three existing and related bodies in Canberra: the RCS is the long standing parent body, the CRTA focusing on issues/seminars/lectures and the CDCC with a single focus in celebrating Commonwealth Day in March each year. Both the latter have been operating since the Coolum CHOGM in 2002, as initiatives of the RCS community, closely aligned with the RCS objectives and chaired by RCS members. Each has built up groups of people interested in what the Commonwealth is doing these various fields. The *Friends* is meant to expand the network by providing for a range of interests and fostering support through a coordinated programme of Commonwealth activities.

A new website has been established which should be a one-stop shop for information about what is happening on the Commonwealth front particularly in Canberra. It is in the developmental stage and should be fully operational in March 2014. You can visit the site at [www.commonwealthfriends.org.au](http://www.commonwealthfriends.org.au)

We believe that these two initiatives should yield positive results for the Society into the future and could generate real and positive change in how the RCS (ACT) perceives itself and how its role in the community might be seen by others.

When the RCS (ACT) faced down its crisis in 2006 it survived because a small group of members decided that the RCS in Canberra was worth supporting and the Council aimed at achieving small gains through a programme of modest and regular activities shaped to meet the Society's objectives.

There is no doubt that in the past the Society has played a meaningful role to an earlier generation. Now the challenge for us is to introduce highly motivated, internationally thinking members of the current generation to the benefits of an association with the modern Commonwealth of Nations. We have a membership that despite the changes in the political and economic climate are committed to sustaining the RCS for current and future generations.

To achieve this the three key questions remain to be addressed in coming years: how to grow the organisation physically among the current generation; how to maintain a Commonwealth identity; and how to sustain the resources to do it?

This will be my final report after an extended term as President. I am greatly indebted to those who have stood beside me – especially the Council members and long standing RCS supporters. I wish the RCS (ACT) every success into the future.

Hugh Craft  
President  
12 February 2014.