



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
Australian Capital Territory Branch

E-NEWS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH

E-Newsletter January 2023

Branch Patron: H.E. General the Hon. David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) Governor-General of Australia



FULL PROGRAM OF EVENTS FOR COMMONWEALTH WEEK

The RCS is planning a full program of events to mark Commonwealth Week in Canberra in March, after three years of cancellations, postponements or a curtailed program due to Covid restrictions.

Commonwealth Day on Monday 13 March will see a return of the Multi-cultural, Multi-faith Celebration hosted by the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) in Barton under its new Executive Director, Professor Anthony Maher. The program for this event, loosely modelled on the traditional Westminster Abbey Commonwealth celebration in London, is still in planning stages, but will involve leaders from the faith communities in Canberra and performances of song and dance, reflecting the city's multi-cultural population. All RCS members, families and friends are welcome.

The annual Commonwealth Low Lecture will be given this year by Professor Anne Twomey, of the University of Sydney, a specialist in International Law. The lecture is named for the late Professor Anthony Low, a former Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University before taking up the Smuts Chair of Commonwealth History at the University of Cambridge. Professor Low, who died in 2015, established the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia, and, with his family, was a long-term member of the RCS. The lecture is jointly hosted by the CRTA and the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.

The Commonwealth Dinner will be held on Thursday 16 March at The Commonwealth Club, Yarralumla.

To round off the week's activities, the annual Cricket Match between The Commonwealth and the Department of Foreign Affairs, will be played on Sunday 19 March. The limited over match will be held at the Forestry Oval in Yarralumla.

Members and Friends of the RCS will receive full details of the above events in February.



Representatives from the Commonwealth's member nations, each holding their country's flag, during the celebration of Commonwealth Day in London at Westminster Abbey in 2022. A massed display of Commonwealth flags is a traditional part of the ceremony.

PANDEMIC LEAVES SMALL STATES' ECONOMIES IN CRISIS

The plight of the Commonwealth's Small States, many already suffering from the destructive effects of climate change, has been made much worse by the 'vast and far-reaching' economic impact of COVID-19, according to a review* by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Described as 'a crisis like no other' the review found that the on-going effects of the pandemic have resulted in 'ravaged' economies and rising poverty levels, with fiscal measures introduced to cushion the effects of the pandemic contributing to rising debt.

Small States account for the majority of the Commonwealth's current 56 members across five regions—Africa, Asia, Europe, the Caribbean and the Pacific—with the greater number of these, in the Pacific and Caribbean, vulnerable to rising sea levels and violent weather events that the review described as 'unparalleled'. While most have populations of 1.5 million or less, some larger Commonwealth countries, like Botswana and Papua New Guinea, are designated 'small states' because they share many characteristics.



This photograph was taken after a cyclone in 2016 had caused widespread damage and deaths in Fiji.

SEMINAR ON DECRIMINALISING POVERTY

Legal experts from across the Commonwealth will take part in a seminar on decriminalising poverty, organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

The seminar, hosted by the Secretariat on 14 February 2023 in London, will discuss the challenges and opportunities in reforming laws that disproportionately affect people living in poverty.

People living in poverty are often penalised for minor offences, frequently caused by their poverty. The fact that they are poor affects their ability to pay for adequate defence; a resulting prosecution can be an impediment to finding employment, preventing them from improving their financial situation.

The seminar will discuss ways to address the challenges posed by laws that criminalise poverty and what needs to be done to promote equal access to justice.

Tourism

The restrictions on non-essential travel has had a pronounced effect on tourism on which many Small States rely. This resulted in their GDP contracting by 7.2 per cent compared with a 3.3 per cent contraction in these areas globally.

Along with a loss of infrastructure, natural resources and livelihoods from serious climatic events, external borrowing has put many in debt crisis, at risk of default and in 'distress' due to unsustainable debt levels.

The review found that Caribbean nations fared the worst from the pandemic's affect on tourism.

The impact on the social and economic development in Small States has resulted in a rise in global poverty levels for the first time in 20 years.

** The above report was drawn from the Executive Summary of the Small States Review. To access the Summary and the full report, which sets out a way ahead for small states' recovery, see www.thecommonwealth.org and follow the links.*

AUSTRALIA'S RANKING SLIDES IN WORLD MEDIA FREEDOM INDEX

Press freedom in Australia has dropped 13 places to 39 in the past 10 years according to 2022 World Press Freedom Index*, a worldwide survey published annually for the past 20 years by the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

The survey assesses the degree of freedom that journalists, news organisations and on-line media have in each country and efforts made by authorities to respect this freedom. Norway, Denmark and Sweden took the first three places for press freedom among 180 countries and territories surveyed, with North Korea ranking last, after Iran and Eritrea.

Australia's decline in the Index is attributed to a changed 'media landscape' in recent years, becoming 'the most concentrated in the world', identifying 'two giant firms' that dominate our media landscape—the Nine Entertainment Group and News Corp., controlled by the Murdoch family. RSF observed that media polarisation was 'fuelling divisions within countries, as well as polarisation between countries at the international level'.

The situation of Australia was also cited in a study of press freedoms in the Commonwealth by the London-based Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS), on behalf of the Commonwealth Foundation, for which it drew on RSF data. Referring to the RSF 2022 report—that reviewed the world situation during 2021—the ICS spoke of the 'fragility' of press freedom in Australia, 'where ultra-concentration of media ownership, combined with growing official pressure, endangers public interest journalism'.

The ICS report also found that the Covid pandemic was widely used by governments as a pretext 'to constrain media freedom and access to official information'.

New Zealand 'a model' of media freedom

The ICS identified five Commonwealth countries in the top 20 of the RSF report. They were New Zealand (ninth globally, and first among Commonwealth nations) followed by Jamaica, Seychelles, Namibia and Canada, and two—the UK and Trinidad and Tobago—in the top 30. New Zealand was described by the RSF report as 'a model' in an otherwise 'media-repressive Asia-Pacific region' because it had safeguards against interference.

The ICS study noted 'significant' regional variations in the RSF data, for example, the low ranking of four Commonwealth countries in South Asia, Sri Lanka (146), India (150), Pakistan (157) and Bangladesh (162) with the this region also having the highest number of killings of journalists, totalling 119 between 2012 and 2022. This accounted for 83 per cent of murdered journalists in the Commonwealth. The ICS observed that 96 per cent of the killings 'go unresolved'.

According ICS, barriers to media freedom include censorship laws, public bans, intimidation, incarceration, and the closure of media outlets. It also identifies the introduction of 'fake news' legislation introduced by Malaysia as a barrier.

RSF statistics show that on 1 January 2023, 544 journalists worldwide were known to be in prison; on 22 January the first reported death of the year was that of Martinez Zogo, a senior journalist in the West African Commonwealth country of Cameroon, whose body was found naked, with signs of torture, on a road a few kilometres outside the capital of Yaounde. He had been abducted five days previously.

**To access the 2022 RSF Index and Report, including a full description of the methodology used, see the RSF website at www.rsf.org For the Media Freedom Summary Report on Commonwealth countries from the Institute of Commonwealth Studies see www.commonwealth.sas.ac.uk and follow the links: Research Projects: Media Freedom in the Commonwealth.*

COMMONWEALTH'S WINNING CRICKET TEAM PRESENTED WITH TROPHY

It was another win in 2022 for the Commonwealth's Cricket XI when it defeated a team from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra in October.

Members from both teams and representatives from eight cricket-playing High Commissions in Canberra that had fielded players for the match were at the trophy presentation at DFAT in January 2023.

The annual match is usually held during Commonwealth Week in March, but like many other events, suffered from postponements due to the Covid pandemic.

The trophy was donated to the RCS by a former High Commissioner for Ceylon in the early 1960s, Major-General Anton Muttukumar, who organised the first match at Duntroon Oval.



The Acting High Commissioner for Sri Lanka, Ms Charmari Rodrigo (left) with Mr Craig Maclachlan, Acting Secretary of DFAT, and Mr Kanti Jinna, RCS President.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Branch AGM

Thursday 23 February 2023 at 6.00 pm

Vercoe Room, Wesley Centre, National Circuit, Forrest

COMMONWEALTH WEEK 2023

Monday 13 March: Multi-Faith Multi-Cultural Celebration

The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Barton. 11 am. All welcome.

Wednesday 15 March: Anthony Low Commonwealth Lecture

Professor Anne Twomey. At ANU.

Thursday 16 March: Commonwealth Dinner

The Commonwealth Club, Yarralumla. 7 for 7.30

Sunday 19 March: The Commonwealth vs DFAT Cricket Match

Forestry Oval, Yarralumla. 11am

Members and friends will be advised of details of all the above Commonwealth Week events in a later notice.

E-NEWS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH is an official publication of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Australian Capital Territory Branch, for Members and Friends of the Commonwealth. It is published regularly throughout the year and replaces the quarterly printed newsletter *Commonwealth News*.

Contact: Maureen Hickman, Editor, at racsact@bigpond.com

Membership inquiries are welcome.