



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
Australian Capital Territory Branch

E-NEWS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH

E-Newsletter September 2023

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

A TIME OF CHANGE FOR ZAMBIA, AFRICA, AND THE COMMONWEALTH

The themes of transformation and change in Africa were addressed by the High Commissioner for Zambia, H.E Elias Munshya, when he spoke to RCS members and friends who attended the annual Winter Lunch at Rama's Restaurant in Canberra in August.



H.E. Elias Munshya, High Commissioner for Zambia (left) with HRH Princess Katarina Karageorgevic, a relation of RCS President Matthew Neuhaus (back). Former RCS President, Mr Kantilal Jinna, is on the right.

With 50 per cent of the continent's population under the age of 25, Mr Munshya said there is eagerness for transformation and change, and a way found to work with the Commonwealth in achieving it 'African nations,' he said, 'must foster enduring partnerships with each other and learn to trade with adversaries as well as friends.' He went on to say that this is not a new idea, others have negotiated these waters successfully; Africa sees the Commonwealth having a role to play in bringing people together to achieve a climate of free and fair trade.

Access to food is a barometer of justice and equity in a country, he said, and food security is crucial if a nation is to have the ability to feed its people so that children do not go to bed crying with hunger.

GABON 'PARTIALLY SUSPENDED' FROM COMMONWEALTH FOLLOWING ARMY COUP

Following an army coup in August, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) has 'partially' suspended Gabon from the Commonwealth 'until democracy is restored'.

This means that Gabon is excluded from Councils of the Commonwealth and all Commonwealth intergovernmental meetings and events. The Commonwealth will continue to provide democracy and electoral assistance. CMAG called on Gabon to guarantee the personal integrity, safety, health and human rights of former President, Ali Bongo.

The coup, by the Armed Forces of Gabon, was launched almost immediately President Ali Bongo was declared winner in elections that were widely condemned for electoral fraud. Brigadier Brice Oligui Nguema, Commander of the Republican Guard, was installed as interim President.

Gabon, a former French colony, joined the Commonwealth at the 2022 Rwanda CHOGM, leaders apparently agreeing that it met the criterion for membership by presenting 'evidence of the functioning of democratic processes'.

A major oil producer with the highest per capita GDP in Africa, one-third of the Gabonese population live below the poverty line, with unemployment as high as 40 per cent among young people.

The Bongo family have ruled Gabon for 56 years, attracting frequent charges of corruption and nepotism. In the latest issue of *The Round Table Journal*, Oren Gruenbaum, a member of its editorial board asks: 'Why was a country as corrupt as Ali Bongo's Gabon ever admitted to the Commonwealth?' www.thecommonwealthroundtable.co.uk/general/eye-on-the-commonwealth

THE CHAGOS ISLANDS—BRITAIN’S LAST COLONY IN AFRICA

The Chagos Archipelago, home to the US Military base of Diego Garcia, remains under British sovereignty, four years after the International Court of Justice ordered its return to Mauritius ‘as rapidly as possible’.

The Court found that Britain did not lawfully complete its decolonisation of Mauritius in 1968. It noted that UK and European courts have recognised that Chagos, known as a British Indian Ocean Territory, was ‘detached’ from Mauritius, 2000 km to its south, three years before its independence. This act by Britain enabled it to enter negotiations with the United States on the latter’s need for ‘a strategically located, relatively secluded archipelago in the Indian Ocean, with the potential to become a listening and communications station’. US demands, however, stipulated that the territory be unpopulated.

To oblige, over an eight year period, Britain forcibly deported 2000 Chagossians, descendants of enslaved people from East Africa and indentured labourers from South East Asia, to Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Negotiations between Britain and Mauritius began in 2022 and there have been at least four rounds of talks in 2023. The Chagossians and their descendants, however, have protested that they are not included in the formal talks.

A seat at the table

After years of protest over their expulsion, which the Human Rights Watch in June this year described as ‘a crime against humanity’ they have made it clear they want a seat at the table, want to return to Chagos with financial assistance to do so, and seek reparations for being deprived of their homeland for over 60 years. Meanwhile, Mauritius has stated its intention to continue the lease arrangements with the US over its base on Chagos, once sovereignty is returned. In this case, with compensation for the Chagossians looking like the only option, it appears to have already been paid.

The United Kingdom Mission to the Office of UN Human Rights in Geneva in April 2023, in an official statement, said it had paid the Mauritian government the equivalent of \$20 million for

Mauritius. English courts and the European Court of Human Rights confirmed that ‘compensation had been paid in full and final settlement’.

The UK government, in 2016, also committed a package of approximately \$40 million over 10 years to support the Chagossians ‘where they now live’. In 2022, a new ‘bespoke [UK] citizenship route’ would enable Chagossians to build their future in the UK should they wish to’. To date, over 4000 applications have been received.

The issue of resettlement of the Chagossians was decided against on the grounds of feasibility, defence and security interests, as well as costs.

Current talks with Mauritius aim ‘to secure an agreement on the basis of international law to resolve all outstanding issues, including those relating to the former inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago,’ according to the UK statement.



COMMONWEALTH SHORT STORY PRIZE

Entries are now open for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, sponsored by the Commonwealth Foundation in London.

The prize, of \$5000, is open to citizens aged 18 and over from all 56 Commonwealth countries.

Stories from 2000 to 5000 words in length, can be written in any one of 13 languages - Bengali, Chinese, Creole, English, French, Greek, Malay, Maltese, Portuguese, Samoan, Swahili, Tamil and Turkish. Stories can also be translated into English from any language.

The deadline for entries is 1 November 2023.

To find out more, including writing tips, visit the Foundation's website at www.commonwealthfoundation.com

CONTROVERSY MARKS ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE AND THE MALDIVES

Zimbabwe's general elections on 23 and 24 August, which resulted in a second term for President Emerson Mnangagwe, attracted a number of observer groups, including a Commonwealth Observer Group, all of which expressed various levels of concern about how they were conducted.

In an interim statement, issued shortly after the results were declared, the Commonwealth Observer Group, chaired by Ambassador Amina Mohamed, assessed the voting process as well-conducted and peaceful.

The statement, while praising Zimbabweans for their enthusiasm and largely peaceful approach, also raised a number of issues that could impact on 'the credibility, transparency and exclusivity' of the process.

Other observer groups were less restrained in their criticism, some expressing deep concern that the electoral process 'did not meet regional and international standards for credibility'.

Ambassador Mohamed stressed that the Commonwealth Observer Group was there 'as friends of Zimbabwe ... as it seeks to consolidate its democratic values', invited to observe the elections by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The full report from the Group is yet to be issued.

Zimbabwe, under its previous President, Robert Mugabe, withdrew from the Commonwealth in December 2003.

2024 CHOGM THEME ANNOUNCED

The theme for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa in October 2024 will be 'One Resilient Common Future: Transforming our Common Wealth'.

Samoa is the first Small Island State from the Pacific to host CHOGM.

In a statement on 21 September, the Samoan Prime Minister, Afioga Fiame Naomi Mataafa, said her country looks forward to sharing 'our unique Samoan culture and traditions as we come together to transform our resilient family into a Common Wealth'.

She added that the Samoan CHOGM promises to deliver concrete solutions to global challenges through the principle of *talanoa*, fostering inclusivity, transparency, and dialogue.

Since the departure of Mugabe, in 2019, Zimbabwe has applied to rejoin, for which it is obliged to meet a number of criteria. Its application is likely to be included in the agenda at the 2024 Samoa CHOGM.



President Mnangagwe

The Maldives, like Zimbabwe, has had a variable association with the Commonwealth, joining in 1982, leaving in 2016—in protest of allegations by other nations of its human rights abuses and failing democracy—and re-joining in 2020.

An 11-strong team of Commonwealth observers, led by the former President of the Seychelles, Danny Faure, was invited to its presidential election on 9 September.

The result saw neither of the two front-runners, President Ibrahim Solih with 39 per cent and Mohammed Muizzu, mayor of the capital, Male, with 46 per cent, clearing the 50 per cent threshold. A second round of voting on 30 September resulted in the election of Mohammed Muizzu.

Mr Muizzu contested the election on an 'India Out' platform, promising to limit India's presence in the Maldives. He is expected to draw the country closer to China, which he did when in power from 2013-2018, signing on to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and obtaining millions of dollars in loans for infrastructure.

Mr Solih, who won the 2018 election in a landslide, returned the Maldives closer to India, which in turn, provided millions of dollars for infrastructure.

Election observers noted a lower than expected voter turnout in the first poll, possibly reflecting 'disenchantment' with Solih's failure, when President, to tackle corruption.

2024 PHYLLIS MONTGOMERIE AWARD OPEN FOR APPLICATIONS

The Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Branch is inviting applications for the 2024 Phyllis Montgomerie Award after a hiatus of several years due to the Covid pandemic.

As a number of past winners have used the \$5000 award on travel and other expenses associated with their project, closed borders proved a major barrier to this aspect of their work.

The Award is named for a past president of the RCS ACT Branch, Mrs Phyllis Montgomerie, who died in 2011, leaving a bequest to the RCS to fund a 'research or education' project. It was decided to use the bequest to further the Society's work in improving the lives and well-being of people in the Commonwealth.

Since the Award was launched in 2014, winning projects have included research in the fields of medical science, the environment, animal behaviour (crop-raiding), interventions in early dementia, and cross-cultural science communication.

The Award is open to Australian citizens and permanent residents. It is not restricted to university students.

For more information about the Award, and to read short biographies of previous winners and their projects, visit the RCS ACT Branch website at www.rcsact.org and follow the links.

The deadline for the 2024 Award is Friday 13 October 2023.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Spring Lunch

Royal Canberra Golf Club

Sunday 22 October 2023

12 noon for 12.30

Cost: \$80

**Guest Speaker: Mr Brian Tunks, archaeologist,
founder and designer of Bisonhome glassware and ceramics**

Acceptances by Monday 16 October

This annual lunch is co-hosted by the Royal Commonwealth Society ACT Branch and the Australia-Britain Society. Come and enjoy good food, good company and the lovely view down the fairway.

Inquiries: Mrs Ann Sutton at a.jsutton@netspeed.com.au

THE COMMONWEALTH vs. DFAT CRICKET MATCH

Sunday 19 November 2023

12 noon

Forestry Oval, Wilf Crane Crescent, Yarralumla

Members will receive a separate notice about the cricket match closer to the event.

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*.

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