



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
Australian Capital Territory Branch

E-NEWS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH

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



GOVERNOR-GENERAL HOSTS DEMOCRACY WORKSHOP FOR COMMONWEALTH STUDENTS



The challenges facing democratic systems in the Commonwealth was the subject of a Workshop at Government House, Canberra, in March, attended by 32 students from 13 Commonwealth nations hosted by the Governor-General, H.E the Hon. General David Hurley (*in the photograph above*) to mark Commonwealth Day in 2021.

The Workshop, on 'Mending Democracy' was organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society's ACT Branch and led by Professor Carolyn Hendriks of the Crawford School of Public Policy at ANU and Professor Jolyon Ford of the ANU Law School.

Countries represented were Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, the United Kingdom and Australia. Most of the participants are studying at Masters or PhD level at the ANU in a range of fields from International Relations to Biochemistry. The group, however, also included four Year 12 students undertaking the International Baccalaureate at Narrabundah College.

Although emphasis on various aspects of democracy varied according to particular conditions in participants' home countries – all of which have endorsed the principles of Democracy, Rule of law

and Human rights that underpin their Commonwealth membership - there was unanimous agreement on 'trust' and 'inclusion' as the main areas needing 'repair'.

In developing countries in Africa, aspiring MPs were said to be 'visible for two months leading up to the election and, after handing out gifts of T-shirts and sweets, disappearing for years until the next election'. As another student put it, why do politicians value 50 million 'likes' on Facebook when most of their people don't have access to the internet, and where young people—representing up to 60 per cent of the population—have no jobs and no education in the political process that would motivate them to vote?

All this, together with long queues on voting day, play their part in eroding trust in a political system, which, without local community engagement, is opaque and inaccessible to the vast majority of people.



To 'mend' democracy, put an end to political apathy and establish trust in the political process the students agreed that there must be education in how the system works, preferably beginning in school, with one Australian participant pointing out that apart from one year of 'Civics' education in 6th grade, he was offered no more, yet entitled to vote at 18.

At the plenary session, Professor Hendriks (*right*), pointing out that these were big issues, asked for ideas of how they might be achieved. The answers ranged from reviving the 'protest culture' of previous generations to reforming 'the institutions', described as 'the source of most problems due to them not working well'.

Ways need to be found, she said, for people to participate in politics in different ways, one way being in local government. Describing this space as 'ripe for renewal', she said it was encouraging to see that, in Australia, more and more young women were standing for election at this level of government.



As the Workshop drew to a close, the Governor-General played a major role in the summing up, saying that 'two words' stood out for him during the workshop: one was 'trust', the other was 'participation'. 'If one is strong', he said, 'so is the other. If one is weak, so is the other.'

Harking back to his swearing-in as Governor-General, he recalled an observation he made at the time (acknowledging its author, the Australian writer David Malouf): 'Australia is not a finished product, it will evolve' - adding his own postscript: 'Democracy is the same'.

In the evening, the Governor-General and Mrs Hurley gave a reception for High Commissioners in Canberra at which he read the Queen's Commonwealth Day Message.

COMMONWEALTH TEAM DEFEATS DFAT IN CRICKET



Mr Tony Muttukumar (right) speaking at the presentation of the trophy, named for his father, at the conclusion of the match. On his right is Mr Kantilal Jinna, President of the RCS ACT Branch.

A team representing Commonwealth cricketing nations in Canberra was victorious over a team from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade when the annual Commonwealth Week match took place in March.

Postponed for a week on account of rain, the match took place at the lovely Forestry Oval in Yarralumla, pictured below. The Commonwealth team included players from Bangladesh, Britain, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa and Sri Lanka.

Appreciation was paid to the Sir Lankan High Commission for the part it played in organisation of the match, which began 54 years ago when the High Commissioner for Ceylon, Major-General Anton Muttukumar, donated the trophy to the RCS ACT Branch for an annual match. After a few years break, the event was revived in 2014 and played during Commonwealth Week. Donations collected at the match totalled \$500 and will go to a residential vocational training school, *Sahawa Sewana*, at Seruwavila, near Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, for differently-abled female adolescents.



RCS BRANCH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General meeting of the RCS AT Branch was held on Tuesday 23 February at the Wesley Centre, Forrest. The following were elected to the Branch Council:

President: Mr Kantilal Jinna
Vice-President: Dr Hugh Craft
Treasurer: Dr Sunita Dhindsa
Councillors: Mrs Ann Sutton
Dr Fiona Rothchilds

Office Bearers are elected for one year and Councillors for three years. In 2021, however, Mr Jinna and Dr Craft will reverse roles mid-year, Dr Craft assuming the position of President and Mr Jinna that of Vice-President. Both have previously served as President of the ACT Branch. The other members of council are Mr Bradley Innes, Dr Elmo Jacob, Mr Jack Milne, Mr Saurabh Singh and Mr Gaurav Sharma who are still serving their three-year term.

The outgoing President, Maureen Hickman, presented Mr Jinna, and a former President, Colin Milner, with certificates of Life Membership for their outstanding contributions to the Branch over many years.

NOTICE OF FUTURE EVENTS

Morning Tea and a Talk on Shakespeare*

by Canberra Poet and Shakespeare Scholar, Dr Mark O'Connor

Friday 23 April 2021 at 10.30 am

at the Niamian Homestead, 65 Goolabri Drive, Sutton

**See notice attached to this e-mail*

Anthony Low Commonwealth Lecture

Thursday 27 May at 5.30 pm

The Commonwealth and Modern Slavery

by ANU Chancellor, the Hon. Julie Bishop, former Australian Foreign Minister

This annual lecture, at the Australian National University, honours the late Commonwealth Historian, Professor Anthony Low. Venue to be confirmed.

It will be followed on **Friday 28 May** by an all-day **Seminar** at ANU Law School on the same subject. Information on both events will be published in a future issue of this publication.

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Membership inquiries are welcome. Application can be made through the website: www.rcsact.org