

## **COMMONWEALTH NEWS**

**RCS Newsletter Spring 2020** 

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

## LONDON RCS ASKS FOR BRANCH ACTION ON FOUR KEY AREAS OF NEED

London RCS has asked the Society's branches worldwide to take the initiative in their regional areas to take action where need has been identified in Communities, Literacy, Equality and the Environment.

This follows a review of the RCS International Network to identify the best way to support the Society's shared vision of improving the lives and prospects of all Commonwealth citizens.

The selection of new Regional and Youth Coordinators for each of the five major regions of the Commonwealth—Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific—is currently under way, following an invitation to

all RCS branches in late August to encourage interest from their membership for these roles as well as volunteers to serve on the Selection Committee. Applications to serve as Working Group Leads i.e. to head one of the four areas of need identified by RCS London's review, were also called for.

Although there are five 'official' regions of the Commonwealth, there will be seven Regional Coordinators in order to identify Australia as a region separate from the Pacific region and to give individual identities to Canada and The Caribbean in the 'American' region.

By November, if all goes going according to plan, each

region will have selected its Working Group Leads, and, from this group, one Lead to work with the RCS Networks Officer in London.

## **Appointments**

Current Regional Coordinators will be stood down on October 30 and cannot reapply. The same rule applies to Regional Youth Coordinators. The period of appointment in both cases will be for two years. The current Regional Coordinator for Australia is Ms Libby Ellis, South Australian RCS Branch President. Mr Jack Milne, a Council member of the ACT Branch, is the current Youth Coordinator.

The main link with London for each region will be the Regional Coordinator who will have monthly engagement with the Society's Networks officer, bi-monthly engagement with Working Group Leads and quarterly engagement with RCS branches in their region. The person filling this role will also be required to make available the Society's promotional materials, notices and events to all branches in the region. They will also be tasked with re-engaging dormant RCS branches and encouraging the establishment of new branches.

## LITERACY WEEK CELEBRATED IN PAPUA-NEW GUINEA



Happy children at Pari Elementary School's new Library Learning Centre in Port Moresby, built by the Canberra-based charity, Buk bilong Picinini, and opened during Literacy Week in September. With the children are (I to r) Leanne Resson, Executive Officer, Buk bilong Picinini, Rupert Bray, COO, Steamships Ltd—one of the charity's long-term donor partners—and Dadi Toka, Deputy Governor of the NCD and Chairman of the Motu Koita Assembly. (See story p.3)

#### FROM THE PRESIDENT . . .

This year has been a year like no other, and, as it draws towards its end, our minds focus inevitably on the coming year and what it will bring. One thing we can be fairly sure of is that international travel to most places will continue to be out of the question until the horrendous number of new cases in other countries—particularly in Europe, parts of Asia and America— fall significantly.

In the ACT, we have just celebrated—if that is the right word—our fourth month without an active case of COVID-19, although social distancing advice means that we hold our Branch meetings by *Zoom*.

The pleasure felt by the Victorian RCS Branch at being chosen to host the International Meeting of RCS Branches in 2021—the centenary of its founding—has been dimmed by uncertainty while still needing to plan for a full program as if all will be well

The effects of the COVID pandemic on research students whose projects require them to travel has resulted in a decision by the RCS Council not to go ahead with the 2021 Montgomerie Award. This action was not taken lightly and was influenced by the way the funds have been used over the years i.e. commonly on travel in support of the winning research project. In fact, the winner of the 2020 Award, ANU PhD candidate Emily Standen, was all ready to continue her research in Fiji and Tonga when the travel restrictions were imposed earlier this year. According to ANU, Emily is but one of many others, stuck half-way through their projects with no option but to wait it out. We were, at least, able to assure Emily that the Award is for the whole period of her current studies and not tied to 2020.

We were fortunate to be able to hold our annual Spring Lunch at the Royal Canberra Golf Club in September, co-hosted with the Australia-Britain Society (see photo p.4). Although COVID regulations required us to have pre-lunch drinks at our tables and thus unable to indulge in the social mingling that is so pleasant at these occasions, the lunch was a great success and attracted a large number of guests. In September we also had the pleasure of handing over a cheque for \$400 to Buk bilong Picinini, our nominated charity for 2020-21, the money donated by RCS members when renewing their subs each year.

Finally, I look forward to welcoming members to my home in December for our annual Branch Christmas Drinks Party (see notice p.4). I hope that this will provide an opportunity to welcome our new members in person and for them to meet others.

Maureen Hickman

## **RELAUNCH OF AFRICA NETWORK WEBSITE**

The ANU African Network Website has been relaunched as part of the DFAT-funded project to increase awareness of Africa and African Studies in the ACT.

Created seven years ago by RCS ACT member and ANU demographer, Dr David Lucas, the website now contains an ACT Africa Expert Directory which lists 71 experts on Africa in the Territory, most of whom are at ANU. It also includes an expanded directory of PhD theses on Africa from ACT universities.

Of 16 African diplomatic missions in Canberra, eight are Commonwealth countries. They are: Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. There are 11 other Commonwealth nations in Africa with no direct representation in Canberra. Zimbabwe, which has a mission in Australia, was suspended from the Commonwealth in 2002, withdrew the following year and applied to rejoin in 2018.

The African Studies website is seen as a key resource for media, government and non-government organiations seeking expert facts and opinions on Africa. The website address is:

www.africanetwork.weblogs.anu.edu.au

## **OUR MAN IN THE HAGUE**



Australia's Ambassador to The Netherlands, Matthew Neuhaus, setting off on his diplomatic appointments by bike during current Covid-related travel restrictions—a mode of transport also adopted by country's Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, as cases continue to increase across Europe. Matthew and Angela Neuhaus are long-term members of the RCS ACT Branch.

#### RCS MONTGOMERIE AWARD RESEARCH ON INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT DEMENTIA

When Mitchell McMaster, winner of the RCS ACT Branch 2017 Phyllis Montgomerie Award, set out to investigate the impact of lifestyle factors in dementia, he was aware that obesity, poor diet, physical and cognitive inactivity are implicated in 30 to 50 per cent of Alzheimer's Disease. What he wanted to test was whether lifestyle changes could lower the risk of dementia, generally, in people already experiencing cognitive decline or mild impairment.

The study that Mitchell McMaster carried out as part of his PhD project at the Australian National University involved modifying the lifestyles of a group of people over the age of 65 who were suffering from cognitive decline or mild cognitive impairment to see if the de-

Mitchell McMaster

cline into dementia could be prevented.

The 119 volunteers were randomly assigned to a Control group or an Intervention group. Both groups completed educational modules on dementia and cognitive decline, a Mediterranean diet, physical activity and cognitive engagement,

and were asked to implement what they had learned into their own lifestyle. The difference, however, was that people in the Intervention group were also given sessions with a dietician, an exercise physiologist to create an exercise a plan, and online brain training.

The funds from the Montgomerie Award were used to pay for sessions with specialists in these areas.

Before the study began, both groups underwent cognitive testing and information was gathered about participants' lifestyles. Testing was repeated immediately after the intervention and at three and six-month follow-ups.

The results showed that people in the Control group were not able to make any significant change to their lifestyles. There had also been no improvement in their cognitive skills over the period of the study.

In contrast, people in the Intervention group that received assistance to make changes in their lifestyle showed significantly higher scores in their cognition at both follow-up time points. Mitchell writes:

'Our interpretation of the findings was that during the cognitive decline period, the brain retains sufficient neuroplasticity, that, given the right intervention, it can 'bounce back' from cognitive decline.'

He believes that this 'proof-of-concept' study provides sufficient evidence to pursue funding for a longer, larger study to confirm that improving the life-

style of people experiencing cognitive decline results in long-term benefits and lower rates of dementia.

Mitchell has now published two of four planned \*research articles that he has made available to our RCS ACT Branch. One of these articles, in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* in September 2020 received widespread coverage in Australian media.

In a message to our Branch that accompanied a report on his research, Mitchell expressed his thanks to the family of Phyllis Montgomerie and the RCS for their contribution to the project through the Award. He expects to finish his PhD studies later this year.

**NOTE**: The 'Award' referred to in this report was named for Mrs Phyllis Montgomerie, a former President and Life Member of the RCS ACT Branch who died in 2011. Mrs Montgomerie left the Branch a bequest to be used for 'education and research'.

The RCS ACT Branch Council has decided not to proceed with the 2021 Award due to current travel restrictions affecting many research projects. The Award is given to 'support' research which in the past, has often been used for travel associated with research.

\*If any reader of Commonwealth News would like to receive a copy of one or both of these journal articles, please email rcsact@bigpond.com **Ed.** 

## RCS SUPPORT FOR BUK BILONG PICININI

Donations from RCS members made it possible to present a cheque for \$400 to the Canberra-based charity, Buk bilong Picinini in September.

The charity was founded by Anne-Sophie Hermann, Chair and Canberra Office Director in 2007, when on a posting to Papua New-Guinea with her husband, Chris Moraitis, the Australian High Commissioner.

At that time, PNG had a collapsed library system and no books for vulnerable children to read and learn from. Anne-Sophie got together a group of volunteers which sought support from businesses to establish Library Learning Centres.

Across the country today, the Centres have 1200 5-year-olds enrolled in an Early Childhood Development Program while older children attend an After-School Literacy Support Program. A digital learning system for teachers and children is about to start. One year ago, the charity celebrated having brought one million high quality children's books to PNG. To find out more visit: www.bukbilongpicinini.org

## **MEMORY OF 'STARING DOWN ZIMBABWE'**

Trying to convince Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe that there was 'a better way of doing things', is one of the enduring memories that Donald McKinnon has of his period as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat from 2000 to 2008.

In an interview recorded in August 2020, Sir Donald describes it as 'Staring down Zimbabwe ... a time-consuming issue over a long time', with President Mugabe, irked by Commonwealth scrutiny and suspended from membership in 2002, quitting altogether in 2003. At the time, Mugabe's violent land seizures of formerly productive farms had resulted in widespread famine, general repression of the population and the arrest and torture of opposition MPs.

Sir Donald also reflected on 'the soft power' of a Secretary-General, relations with the Royal Family, and the need for the Commonwealth and multilateralism in a post-COVID world.

The filmed interview with Sir Donald —speaking from his home in New Zealand—is one of four arranged by the Commonwealth Round Table *Journal of International Affairs* with surviving former Secretaries-General during the COVID restrictions in London. The others interviewed are Sir Shridath 'Sonny' Ramphal (1975-1990) in Barbados, Chief Emeka Anyaoku (1990-2000) in Nigeria and Kamalesh Sharma (2008-2016) in India.

All ranging in age between 78 and 91, these 'venerable gentlemen ... readily and graciously agreed to our request', according to *Round Table Journal* editor Venkat lyer, who saw it as 'an exercise in public education about the history and evolution of the Commonwealth'.

The initial idea to look at the contemporary Commonwealth through the eyes of its former Secretaries-General came from Nicholas Watts of the Independent Forum of Commonwealth organisations (IFCO) during a conversation with Venkat Iyer, to whom, the latter says, the Round Table 'owes a debt of gratitude'.

The interviews, on *Zoom*, were conducted at short notice over two days in August by Rita Payne, a former Asia Editor of BBC World TV, who is also a member of the Round Table's editorial board.

The interviews can be watched on the Round Table's **YouTube** channel accessible through its website: www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk

\*Zimbabwe, under its current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has applied to re-join the Commonwealth.

The RCS ACT Branch Newsletter *Commonwealth News* is published four times a year. Letters and contributions are welcome. Contact: Maureen Hickman, Editor, at maureen.hickman@bigpond.com

## **SPRING LUNCH IN CANBERRA**



Mr Robert Campbell and Mrs Helen Campbell (seated) and Mrs Audrey Wilson were among guests at the Spring lunch jointly hosted by the RCS ACT Branch and the Australia-Britain Society at the Royal Canberra Golf Club in September. This was the first social gathering for both societies since the easing of COVID restrictions that began in the ACT in March.

## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

#### **RCS Branch Christmas Drinks**

The President, Maureen Hickman, will host Christmas Drinks on

Sunday 13 December 4 to 6 pm

at

# Shackleton Park Unit 6, 72 Shackleton Circuit, Mawson

Acceptances by email to maureen.hickman@bigpond.com by Monday 7 December

In the spirit of Christmas, please bring a small gift for the Salvo's Christmas Appeal.

**Parking:** Advice on parking will be provided by return email. No. 6 is inside the complex, not on the street.

## **NEW MEMBERS**

The RCS ACT Branch warmly welcomes new members Mr Lachlan Marshall, Mr Peter Stagg, Mr Clifford To and Professor Robert Whittaker.

## **VALETE**

The President and Council of the RCS ACT Branch extend their sincere condolences to the families and friends of three of our members: **Air Marshall David Evans**, who died in September at the age of 95; **Ms Raewyn Bastian**, who died in August, was prominent in community affairs in the Canberra region; and **Commander David Clinch**, an active member of the Branch for many years, who died in October.