



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
Australian Capital Territory Branch

COMMONWEALTH NEWS

RCS Newsletter Winter 2020

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

INSTITUTE CONFERENCE SHINES LIGHT ON ISSUES THAT CHOGM AVOIDS

The current State of the Commonwealth came under close scrutiny at an on-line unofficial conference organised by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies from their London headquarters in June.

Held over a 12-hour period to span time zones of the entire Commonwealth, the conference was designed to fill a gap left by the postponement of the Rwanda CHOGM (*see story this page*) and with no plans by the Secretariat to hold any alternative events on-line.

A report* on the meeting by Professor Philip Murphy, Director of the Institute, spoke of the 'urgency and passion' of participants in the six panel discussions in contrast to the 'platitudes and empty rhetoric' that often characterise Commonwealth meetings.

The unofficial nature of the conference, he said, allowed it to work 'against the grain of the official Commonwealth' which, over the past 10 years, had focused on internal processes and Commonwealth leadership rather than an outward-looking agenda.

In contrast, the Institute's interest in exploring how the Commonwealth could be reimagined and reinvigorated and indications from on-line workshops it had held earlier on Decolonisation and Commonwealth History, had revealed a 'strong appetite' for this topic.

As a result, the June conference decided to tackle a topic that almost all its members had experienced but the inter-governmental Commonwealth, i.e. that coordinated by the Secretariat, had avoided: the complex and often poisonous legacies of the British Empire.

It was this key area the conference sought to explore, with panel discussions considering attempts to overturn colonial-era laws criminalising homosexuality, campaigns to obtain reparations for slavery, and colonial Human Rights abuses.

Two separate panels focused on contemporary threats to democracy and press freedom in the world, with resemblances in parliamentary systems and laws governing the press providing 'a fascinating comparative basis' for the study.

Discussions on these topics pointed to the fact that

the greatest threats to democracy and press freedom are coming increasingly from the elected leaders of member countries.

The conference suggested that it is time to revisit alternative histories of the Commonwealth and 'perhaps reawaken a focus and energy that has been sorely lacking at inter-government level', said Professor Murphy. *See the Institute's website commonwealth.sas.ac.uk for Professor Murphy's article and to hear recordings of the conference.

LEADERS SUMMIT POSTPONED UNTIL 2021

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) planned for June 2020 in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, is now likely to take place some time in 2021 if and when COVID-19 restrictions allow.

At that meeting, Heads will need to decide whether to re-appoint Baroness Patricia Scotland (*pictured*) for a



second term as Commonwealth Secretary-General or select a new one. If she is not re-appointed, it will be the first time that CHOGM has not given the incumbent a second term.

From the start, Patricia Scotland's term as Commonwealth Secretary-General has been marked with controversy and criticism. Recently, a rift between the Commonwealth

Secretariat and the British Government resulted in suspension of its financial support for the organisation (a move followed by Australia and New Zealand) but now largely restored until leaders meet.

Baroness Scotland, born in Dominica and educated in the UK, was Attorney-General in the Blair Government. The Commonwealth Secretariat is the main administrative body that supports member states, coordinates Commonwealth diplomacy, and organises CHOGMs.

FROM THE PRESIDENT . . .

As the months go by in this unusual new world we live in, RCS branches, like other community organisations throughout Australia, find themselves cancelling or postponing events planned for the months ahead and keeping in touch with members in newsletters like this.

It seems insensitive to even talk about disappointment in cancelling 'events' at a time of so much suffering, our TV screens bringing such heart-breaking scenes of grief and loss, overwhelmed hospitals and exhausted health workers. The latest outbreak of the virus in Victoria, which, as I write, has just recorded a record number of new infections, and its spread to parts of NSW, has shaken any optimism in the ACT that we might soon return to something like 'normal' life. Like so many other organisations, our Branch has been holding our monthly Council meetings by Zoom (facilitated by Council member, Gaurav Singh). While these are useful on one level, I believe we all miss the human contact with our colleagues. One event to cheer us in our isolation has been the birth of their first baby to another young Council member, Saurabh Singh, and his wife Virginia. Her name is Indira, meaning 'beauty' in Hindi.

The relaxed Covid-19 restrictions in the ACT in June allowed us to make a courtesy visit to our Patron, the Governor-General, at Government House. Our small group included two former RCS ACT Branch presidents, Hugh Craft and Kanti Jinna, and myself. We came away feeling greatly assured of his interest and on-going support for our work as a branch.

This issue of the newsletter features a report (see page opposite) on a talk by former Branch Councillor, Daniel McKay, at a morning tea for members earlier this year. Daniel is midway through his PhD studies at the University of Cambridge— his topic being the early Colonial Conferences—precursors to current Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Filled with humorous anecdotes, Daniel's talk took us back to times when our leaders could safely be away for quite lengthy periods.

On Page 4, there is a reference to 'services' in a report on post-Brexit trade. When we talk among ourselves about 'goods and services' some of us may think of the GST and the *delivery* of 'services' e.g. by the plumber. But in the world of trade, 'services' has a very different meaning i.e the *trade* in 'services'. I am indebted to my friend, Sally Thorpe, an economist, who gave me a personal tutorial to clarify the subject. I hope you some of you may find it as interesting and enlightening as I did.

Maureen Hickman

SUPPORT FOR ENDING DISCRIMINATION

A two-year legal reform program, funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office to support Commonwealth countries that wish to reform discriminatory laws, has now finished its work.

To carry out the program during Britain's term as Commonwealth Chair-in-Office, the Equality and Justice Alliance was formed, comprising four international NGOs, including the Royal Commonwealth Society*.

It was at the 2018 London CHOGM that British Prime Minister Theresa May expressed 'deep regret' for her country's role in instituting laws that discriminate against women, girls, and LGBT people, and their continued existence in many Commonwealth countries.

'They were wrong then, and they are wrong now,' she told the meeting.

There are at least 19 Commonwealth countries where forced marriages are common due to customary laws and practices, 34 countries that criminalise consensual same-sex acts, including two that retain the death penalty in some regions, and 30 that do not guarantee men and women equal pay in the workplace.

There is a growing number of countries, however, that have made significant progress, according to the Alliance, thanks to 'the bold action of governments, parliaments and civil society organisations'.

To support the work, RCS London commissioned three pieces of complementary, multi-country research to form a series *Building Stronger Equality Movements*. A booklet, *Towards a Common Future*, funded by the British Government in support of commitments made at the 2018 CHOGM, can be downloaded from the RCS London website: www.thercs.org

**The other Alliance members were the Human Dignity Trust, the Kaleidoscope Trust and Sisters for Change.*

SEYCHELLES TACKLES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Seychelles parliament has given unanimous approval to new legislation that will help curb violence against women and girls as well as providing penalties and rehabilitation for perpetrators.

The number of reported domestic violence cases in The Seychelles has tripled in the last 20 years. Research by the Commonwealth Secretariat estimated the cost to the nation's economy was about 4.6 per cent of GDP in 2016, one per cent higher than the country's annual education budget.

The Minister for Family Affairs, when introducing the legislation in The Seychelles parliament, expressed the hope that it would bring 'a new culture and a new way of living and being'.

GRAND RECEPTIONS, BALLS, MARKED EARLY MEETINGS OF COLONIAL LEADERS

Early Colonial Conferences in the 19th century were known as *conversations* as a quietly radical step to being people into one room to have a conversation with each other.

These Conferences, precursors to present day Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), were usually held in London, would last five or six weeks—in comparison with CHOGM which usually lasts five or six days—and were marked by balls and receptions, stays at grand country houses and various other events arranged around the conference itself.

And it didn't stop there. When they returned to Australia our delegates were honoured with huge events to welcome them home.

Details of this fascinating time in British colonial history were revealed by former ACT Branch Councillor, Daniel McKay, who spoke at a morning tea for members earlier this year while on a short visit to Canberra from Peterhouse College, Cambridge, where he is a PhD candidate in the World History Program.

The first conference, in 1887, was arranged to coincide with the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, a time of national celebrations and colourful receptions, formal balls and parties. Underlying the splendour, however, was a practical exercise in diplomacy by Britain, which, having lost its American colonies during the War of Revolution, was fearful of losing the others, especially Canada, 'unless we treat them better'.

A leisurely journey

At this first meeting was a young future Prime Minister of a newly-federated Australia, Alfred Deakin, aged 30. On his first overseas trip—a leisurely journey by ocean liner, his ship going through the relatively new Suez canal—he took the opportunity to visit the Egyptian pyramids, and later, the great museums and art galleries of Europe.

In 1902, the London meeting, arranged to coincide with the coronation of Edward VII, was attended by Australia first Prime Minister Edmund Barton.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP OF THE RCS

Thank you to all those members who have renewed their membership of the RCS ACT Branch this year. We are grateful for this because membership subscriptions are our only source of regular income. While we have lost a number of long-standing members over recent years which left a gap in our books, we are encouraged by a growing number of new members joining the Branch.



Mr Daniel McKay (left) with RCS ACT Youth Coordinator Mr Bradley Innes and Dr Denis Blight at the morning tea for members held at the home of former RCS President, Colin Milner, earlier this year.

The meeting in 1907, with the Liberal Government in power in Britain, was the last of the 'Colonial' Conferences, the colonies of the old Empire having become Dominions. By then, the colonies had found a way to cooperate with each other and the decision was made that the meetings would be known in future as Imperial Conferences and have their own secretariat.

At the 1911 meeting, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher's wife, Margaret, not only went to the balls and parties, but took part in a Suffragette march in London, Australia having achieved votes for women in 1902.

The First World War saw a change in the relationship between Britain and its dominions, Australia and Canada, because of the contribution each had made to the conflict. The Round Table was founded and 'imperialists' were lobbied, driving a vision of 'Common Wealth' as a formal constitutional structure.

With this vision beginning to consolidate, trust was growing between delegates and things began moving at a faster rate. At the 1922 conference, Dominions won the right to enter treaties. In 1926, delegates from India and Ireland were acknowledged as equal in status, as sister nations, side by side, talking to each other, with the endorsement of One country, One vote.

At the Ottawa Conference in 1932, at a time of the Great Depression, Imperial Preferences came into sway, and the need to talk about these issues in the hope that something good would come out of it was recognised by delegates. The final Imperial Conference in 1937 discussed the worsening situation in Europe, overwhelmingly supporting appeasement.

In 1949, all this came together with the London Declaration and the birth of the modern Commonwealth with the admission of a republican India as a member.

CAN THE 'COMMONWEALTH EFFECT' BOOST TRADE WITH UK POST-BREXIT?

In a post-Brexit and post-COVID world, it is unlikely that the economies of the Commonwealth will import on the scale that the European Union does, and, although Commonwealth trade will become more important to Britain, it will not be substantial enough to replace it.

This is the conclusion of Malcolm Abbott, an Associate Professor of Economics at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, in an article entitled 'A long-term view of the United Kingdom's Economic Relations with the Commonwealth' in the current (July) issue of the *Round Table Journal*.

While some individual nations of the Commonwealth will become more important trading partners with the UK, it is not necessarily true that they all will. The Global Economic Crisis of 2008 showed the extent to which general economic conditions can have a substantial impact on countries, an example being the decline in trade with Canada, India and Australia/New Zealand. Europe is declining in importance as an export destination and Commonwealth nations are not rising to any substantial degree. Instead, the main growth in import demand is coming from countries in the Asia-Pacific region i.e. China, Japan, South-East Asia whose populations have rising incomes.

The Commonwealth Effect

At an individual level, the UK-Commonwealth trade linkages can be very significant and, in some cases, a high reliance on the UK market. For example, he writes that 54.4 per cent of Botswana's total world exports go to the UK, 22.7 per cent of exports from Belize, 19.3 per cent from Seychelles and 10 per cent or more of total exports from a range of other developing Commonwealth countries. These high levels in individual cases seem to indicate that there is sometimes a discernable 'Commonwealth Effect', indicating a propensity of Commonwealth nations to trade with each other, or at least, the UK.

Professor Abbott identified two problems from the UK's perspective in being able to take advantage of this 'effect'.

First, he says, the greatest 'effect' is among the poorer and smaller of the Commonwealth nations. Second, it is not possible to prove that the 'effect' does not just reflect past relationships and not some enduring characteristic that is an under-utilised resource that can be leveraged.

Even so, it might still be an important factor in promoting trade between the UK and Commonwealth nations, and might also be more pronounced in the case of the trade in services and investment flows where the use of a common language and common institutional arrangements may promote stronger economic relations.

Services and Investment

According to Professor Abbott, the greatest scope for deepening economic relations between the UK and its Commonwealth partners comes in the services sector and that of investment flows.

Already these aspects of trade are important—especially trade in services—and are expected to grow and develop over time. Investment flows, probably not as high as one might expect, could change.

Much of the future negotiations between the UK and the Commonwealth will cover a range of issues associated with investment and trade in services, and much of the prospects of growth in trade might depend on the success of these negotiations.

NOTE: This report draws on an abstract of Professor Abbott's article and discussion points based on the issues it raises. This is available as open access on the Round Table Journal website:

www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk

The UK is one of the biggest service exporting countries in the world and the article's reference to 'services' means those activities by trading nations that are not 'goods' or foreign direct investment. These 'services' might include professional consultancy services on foreign business activities such as banking, the provision of financial advice, computer technology, or the outsourcing of 'help desks' for phones and internet services. 'Services' also include education e.g. income derived from foreign students, or the provision of specialised advice or the transfer of professional 'know-how' through consultancies. **Ed.**

SAVE THIS DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

Sunday 20 September

Spring Lunch at Royal Canberra Golf Club

This function has been booked and will go ahead if restrictions allow. Members will be advised by email.

NEW ACT BRANCH MEMBER

The President and Council of the RCS ACT Branch warmly welcome new member, Ms Pamela Cocks.

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