

History

The modern Commonwealth grew from the post-war currents of decolonization, but its beginnings were deeply rooted in British imperial history. Changes in its name reflected changing global realities: the British Empire became the British Commonwealth and then the Commonwealth of Nations or simply the Commonwealth.

This evolution from Empire to Commonwealth began in Canada in the last century. The British North America Act of 1867 made Canada the first Dominion, a status which eventually came to imply equality with Britain. Australia achieved Dominion status in 1900, South Africa in 1910 and the Irish Free State in 1921. India's decision in 1949 to remain in the Commonwealth after becoming an independent Republic was made possible by a new formula which no longer required allegiance to the Crown, something many nations could not accept.

From 1960 onward the Commonwealth expanded rapidly. Its multiracial character was reinforced as countries in the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean joined others from Africa and Asia.

The Commonwealth Today

Today the Commonwealth is a unique voluntary association linking 49 independent nations across the globe. Bringing together developed and developing countries, small island nations and continental land masses, the Commonwealth includes over one billion people. About 60 per cent of this population is under the age of 25.

One important factor in the success of the modern Commonwealth is the existence of its central co-ordinating organization — the Commonwealth Secretariat. It was established in 1965 in London, England, to facilitate co-ordination and consultation in all areas of Commonwealth joint endeavour. The Secretariat is instrumental in organizing the co-operative efforts of Commonwealth members to assist with economic and social development, especially of smaller member countries.

The Secretariat is headed by a Secretary-General who is appointed by the Heads of Government. At present, Shridath Ramphal, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Justice in Guyana, heads the Secretariat. Member countries staff the Secretariat with international civil servants and English is the common working language.

All Commonwealth countries make assessed or voluntary financial contributions to a variety of Commonwealth activities. The Secretariat provides information and assistance to governments, as in the drafting of legislation, the handling of international trade negotiations and the organizing of government services. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) is the largest Commonwealth development program. Other activities include the Youth Program, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Program, and the activities of the Women's Unit.

One of the most innovative and successful co-ordinating mechanisms pioneered by the Commonwealth is the holding of regular

Classification of countries according to population (1983)
Commonwealth members: Total 49 United Nations members: Total 159

