

Then, in 1996, I was lucky enough to be chosen a Commonwealth fellow, which meant a month of talk and travel with 11 other mid-career professionals from around the Commonwealth. We spent two weeks in England and then two weeks in Canada studying institutions and, more importantly, examining each other's perspectives and biases. Not surprisingly, we bonded just as a younger version bonded nine years before.

At our first meeting, there was general discussion of how the Commonwealth was perceived in our own countries. It was a difficult session; the impressions were vague, the details sketchy. Heads of government meetings are always good for a photo-op or two but does anyone know what important decisions these leaders make before and after the pictures are taken?

The clearest images were of athletes competing in the Commonwealth Games. (In fact, just this week I scanned the electronic library of the Winnipeg Free Press and fully 8 of every 10 references to the Commonwealth were sports related.) And of course the Queen, a symbol of past glories, came up often enough in our group discussion. She was seen as the stitch that knitted all those loose threads. The Queen and the Commonwealth were indivisible, except for our Australian friend whose incipient Republicanism was barely hidden.

In only one or two cases could these educated, well-informed professionals speak with any confidence about the Commonwealth's presence in their countries.