

was accorded the following functions: to facilitate and promote consultation both bilaterally and multilaterally among members; to prepare and circulate factual papers on international questions of common concern to all Commonwealth governments; to act as a focal point and a link for various specialized Commonwealth agencies; to undertake studies on various subjects in the economic, social and cultural fields; and to service Commonwealth meetings.

Members have complete freedom to belong to any grouping, association or alliance or, of course, to remain non-aligned. Membership carries no obligation to come to the assistance of another member that may be attacked, though naturally Commonwealth countries would be seriously concerned about such a development. At an earlier stage, commerce was an important cohesive factor but, with the natural processes of economic growth and the liberalization of trade on a multilateral basis following the Second World War, the Commonwealth preference system became relatively less significant, particularly for the more-developed members. This significance has further diminished with Britain's entry into the European Community on January 1, 1973. Nevertheless Commonwealth trade links remain important. Britain has engaged in efforts to assist developing Commonwealth countries in negotiating terms of association with the EEC. Thus, Britain's entry into the Common Market may well contribute to an increase in economic prosperity within the Commonwealth.

The association has grown into a very useful vehicle for consultation at all levels. At the top level, the heads of government of recent years have inclined to a meeting every two years. Their meeting in Ottawa in August 1973 is the third to be held outside of London, the others being in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1966 and Singapore in 1971. Apart from heads of government meetings, there have been numerous regular or periodic meetings of ministers and officials on functional matters and an almost continuous succession of meetings on a broad spectrum of international relations, including law, trade, development assistance, education and youth matters. Through such consultations the Commonwealth continues to act as an instrument for practical international co-operation along functional lines. Economic assistance for the less-developed members has long been a matter of concern. The Colombo Plan was a Commonwealth initiative rising from the consideration of the political and economic problems of South Asia by Commonwealth foreign ministers meeting in Colombo in January 1950. As the plan of assistance emerged in the first few months of 1950, a decision was taken to invite non-Commonwealth countries in the area to participate in the Plan. This was done to ensure economic progress throughout the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Development assistance programs for the Commonwealth countries in Africa and in the West Indies are further examples of the way in which economic assistance has been channeled bilaterally from the wealthier to the less-developed members. A further step toward practical co-operation for development was taken by the heads of government at the Singapore Conference of 1971 in their decision to expand the Commonwealth Program for Technical Co-operation by creating the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, to which all members in a position to do so contribute for activities in the field of training and education.